Company

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by Dipnoi

Summary

Prompt: An AU where Hannibal kidnaps Will to eat him but ends up falling in love with him instead. Will develops Stockholm syndrome.

So nice to have company for dinner.

Chapter 1

So nice to have company for dinner.

Hannibal Lecter and his most recent guest ran into each other, literally, as Lecter left his office late in the evening. His guest, an agitated, unshaven man, brushed past him without even looking to see whom he had hit.
Lecter paused a moment to assess the empty street, before turning and lunging. In the space of moments he was on him, one arm curling around his abdomen, the other cracking his head against the brick facade. He slumped into Lecter's waiting arms like a sandbag. Lecter carried him, fireman style, and slid him into the trunk. It all took less than five minutes.

Now, at his home, his guest, a William Graham according to his driver's licence, began to wake, eyes twitching under their lids, limbs testing the restraints that held him fast to the elegant solid wood chair. He sits up slowly, clearly aware, but never looking at Lecter directly. Lecter ignores him to put the finishing touches on his table settings. He is famished, but taste, like so many things, has a deep psychological component, and presentation is important.

“Will you let my dogs out?”

“...Excuse me?”

“My dogs. You don't have to look after them, but there isn't enough food in the house, and they'll starve before anyone notices me missing. You have my keys, and the address is on my ID. I'm begging you, please. They're just animals; they don't deserve that.”

That he has dogs is not surprising, he reeks of canine and cheap cologne, but the request itself is unusual, calm, collected, and strangely accepting of what is about to happen. Lecter is used to pleading, even last requests, but this... “Do you not think to beg for your own life, before asking for those of your dogs?”

Graham laughs, high, creaky, and cynical. “Don't play stupid. You don't let people go, and you don't care if I beg. You're going to devour me.” He says it with such stark certainty, placing it amongst the rising sun and the irresistible pull of gravity as law of the universe.

Lecter's hands freeze where they are twisting a napkin into a rose. He turns slowly, then stalks across the room like a predator on the savanna. He grabs Graham's chin and twists his face so that he has no choice but to look Lecter in the eye. Graham groans, low and panicked. Lecter searches his face, long and hard, before releasing him with a smile.

He returns to the table, humming under his breath. Mechanically, he pulls up a second place setting. “I do hope you are in the mood for dinner, Mr. Graham.”

Graham blinks, “I'm sorry, what?”

“You'll forgive the abruptness of my invitation, but you simply cannot refuse.” He twists the second napkin into an elegant flower. “We must speak, you and I. After all, it seems that you know all about me, yet I feel that I barely know anything about you. I would like to remedy that. How do you feel about kidney?”

Chapter 2

There is a certain joy in cooking for others, a pleasure beyond that of the food itself: one born of partaking at once in both the delights of the body and the delights of the mind, of being wholly fulfilled, but also, in the case of Hannibal Lecter, that of sharing one's deepest passions. He has always been a highly social sociopath, with a taste for company as sophisticated as his taste for wine, and he takes unfeigned delight in feeding others his creations, in showing to them the work which with his own hands he has brought to an art.

Not all his passions are so easily shared, nor so commonly appreciated.

He releases Graham's hands while standing behind him, maintaining a position of power and control. Graham's feet remain tied and the knife is notably absent from its customary place alongside the spoon. It is an appalling lapse in his duties as host, but Lecter supposes that circumstances excuse such behaviour on his part.

Grahams watches silently as Lecter slips in and out of the kitchen and places their meal (devilled kidney with mango chutney) just so. As Lecter retrieves the bottle of red he had left to breathe on the sideboard, Graham blurts, “Are you a chef?”

Lecter pauses to better bask in Graham's strange mortification at his own outburst. It is apparent being kidnapped has him terribly wrong-footed. “Are you fond of wine, Mr. Graham?” He asks with the subtle insinuation that to be otherwise would be unimaginable heresy.

“I- Well, it's not whiskey, but I like it well enough.”

“Good.” Lecter smiles and pours them both a healthy glass, before seating himself. “To answer your question, I am not a chef by profession, though I cannot rightly refer to it as a simple hobby. It is a passion, Mr. Graham, I hope that you of all people would understand.”

Graham snorts and watches him as he slices a thin morsel to bring to his mouth. “Do eat, Mr. Graham.”

Graham laughs an empty laugh and does not deign to pick up his fork. Lecter runs his own knife along the meat of his thumb, bringing a well of dark blood to the surface. He places it in his mouth and hollows his cheeks with gentle suction. He pulls it out and after cursory inspection of the cut, he says, dark and low, “It would please me to see you eat.”

Graham's Adam's apple bobs visibly. He nods once, then again, and picks up his fork.

Lecter looks back to his own plate. “Now, as we are conversing, I must ask you an equal question: what is your own profession? Detective? Private investigator?”

“Teacher. I- I teach.”

“And teaching, that is your passion?”

Graham, chewing with cautious thoughtfulness, shakes his head.

“If not teaching, what then brings light to your everyday?”

Graham's mouth twists strangely. “I'm sorry, no. I can't sit here and make small talk with you, and seeing as I have no choice in sitting here, I'm not going to talk about my “passions” with you.”

“May I ask why not?”

Graham sighs in exasperation, hands jerking in an agitated duet. “Because you just kidnapped me! You bashed my head into a wall! I undoubtedly have a concussion, which explains why I'm still talking to you, and- I'm having a candlelight dinner with a man who is clearly a serial killer!”

Lecter raises one eyebrow. “Does the nature of a serial killer preclude enjoyment of fine dining? Can I not, as a murderer, still enjoy the company of my fellow man?”

“No, no you can't! You can't just-” Graham produces a high, distressed sound in the back of his throat. “Try to kill me, then have me for dinner like it makes no difference to you!”

They stare at each other in silence, Graham panting, chest heaving with every breath as gentle classical washes over them. Graham tilts his head, and asks, scandalized. “Is that Vivaldi?”

Chapter 3

One may understand much of a man by how he chooses to live.

Baltimore is a grand city, a teeming hive of humanity, filled with ample diversion and ample prey. It is a place for those who thrive on the rush and press of millions of lives buzzing in an urban symphony, and a place too for those who hunt their own kind, those who wish to go unnoticed in the activity and confusion, as all cities are.

Wolf Trap, Virginia, in the halcyon lee of the metropolitan chimera that is Alexandria, Arlington, and Washington D.C., is disquieting in its quietness, in its lush, verdant peacefulness. Graham's rustic house is relatively isolated, well out of earshot of all surrounding neighbours, but no hermit's retreat. The motley pack of dogs follow Lecter at a respectful distance as he goes room to room. As former strays, they lack the easy trust of most domestic dogs, but with the practicality that is nature to all hungry animals, they have deferred judgement in exchange for a few links of sausage.

He tarries longest in the kitchen, hands trailing the counter, opening the drawers and cupboards, taking inventory of the days and ways of a more-or-less solitary life spent in the company and affection of creatures of simple understanding and simple needs, before he climbs the stairs to the single bedroom.

The rest of the house smells cloyingly of penned-in animals, but the bedroom is dominated instead by the smell of sweat and fear. He presses a pillow to his face and breathes deeply, drowning in the thick terror of the man tied to a chair in the superfluous guest bedroom back in Baltimore.

It's late when he returns, after a full day at the office and a three-hour detour to small-town Virginia. He leaves the house unlit, trusting his eyes in the darkness, and he walks the hall that leads to the guest room, quiet as vapour. He pauses at a faint copper smell that hangs in the air and rolls his eyes. He turns the key, twists the handle and pushes the door open, simultaneously stepping back, so that when Graham barrels through the door, Lecter has the upper hand, slamming him into the opposite wall. Graham kicks, scratches, and struggles, and Lecter slams him once more into the wall. In a surge of desperation, Graham frees an arm and elbows him sharply in the abdomen, slipping away through the kitchen, Lecter fast on his heels.

Graham, unfamiliar with the dark kitchen, stumbles over a small stepladder, and keeps running, hissing, “Fuck, fuck, fuck.” Lecter catches him in a full body tackle, and they both land heavily on the dining room floor. Graham thrashes, still reaching for escape for all that he is winded, gasping. Lecter pins Graham's legs with his weight, twists one arm behind Graham's back, and curls his own around Graham's throat and gradually tightens. “Stop,” He whispers in Graham's ear, voice rough with exertion. “Stop, or I stop you.” Graham stills.

They lie there, on the wood floor, harsh breaths filling the air around them, Graham pinned like an insect on a board, while Lecter cradles Graham's head with the same arm he used to

choke him, murmuring soft words in the language of his mother, high on adrenaline and exhaustion.
Half an hour later, Graham is once more tied to a chair, this time in the kitchen, while Lecter cleans Graham's rope-burn raw and bloody wrists. Graham laughs, though it quickly turns to a coughing fit. When he gets his breath back, he croaks, “It was worth a shot.”

Lecter says nothing, in the process of putting together a suitable icepack.

“Turns out, picking locks has a bit of a knack to it if you don't have the right tools.” Graham descends once more into coughing. Lecter fetches a glass of water, and tilts it for Graham as he drinks, Adam’s apple bobbing underneath an already yellowing bruise.

Lecter should probably kill him, should probably reach across the island and strangle him, press his thumbs in until Graham's trachea gives, but he's feeling sentimental. He brushes his hand along the back of Graham's neck, feeling each vertebra, and Graham expresses himself in a unhappy gurgle.

It's been a long, long time since he's had a relationship this honest, and even a stray might be taught to trust.

Chapter 4

It's the morning of the second day after the kidnapping (and attempted murder) of one Will Graham, and all is right with the world. Sunshine thick as syrup pours into the kitchen where Lecter is preparing breakfast (eggs Benedict and a grapefruit, drawn and quartered.) Graham quietly watches him cook, pressing a fresh ice-pack to his shoulder with his freed hands. (Lecter is not so crass as to expect him to eat like an animal, escape attempt or no.) The bruising along the length of Graham's neck has not improved with time and better lighting. There's a small cut on his upper lip that Lecter failed to notice the night prior.

“I feel,” Murmurs Lecter as he poaches the eggs, “That we have begun this journey on the wrong foot, you and I.”

Graham snorts. “I don't know where you got that idea; you've been a wonderful host, except for how you kidnapped me and won't let me leave.”

“With your permission, I would like to call you William. In return, you may call me Hannibal.” Lecter ignores Graham's goad. Compromise is, after-all, a cardinal necessity of any kind of relationship, and his frustration is understandable, given the circumstances.

“Hannibal? Really? Hannibal-rhymes-with-cannibal?”

Lecter kept his eyes trained on the sizzling bacon, focusing on achieving a pleasantly crisp texture, wary of the thin line between perfection and ruin. “Mmm, Phoenician in origin, meaning 'grace of the possessor,' a reference to the near-east fertility god Ba'al, I believe. The most famous bearer was a brilliant military strategist, Carthaginian general, and opponent of the Roman republic. A name of fine lineage, though William is no less so.” He looks over his shoulder and has the momentary pleasure of making firm eye contact before Graham flinches and looks away. “'The desire to protect,' no?”

“It's Will- Just Will.” He seems uncomfortable, almost embarrassed, ducking his head and hiding behind the skewed frame of his abused glasses.

“Will, then.”

A quiet falls around them, in which he assembles the disparate pieces of the meal into a cohesive, attractive presentation, the sunlight on his hair lending him a burnished halo.

Graham frowns thoughtfully before breaking the peaceful silence. “What are you doing?”

In response, Lecter raises a imperious eyebrow and glances pointedly at the plates on the counter-top.

Graham rolls his eyes. “No, why are you doing this?”

“Because breakfast,” Lecter serves two plates on the island. “Is the most important meal of the day.”

An exasperated sigh follows him as he fetches the coffee. Graham's discomfort simmers below his mask of irritation and crotchety disapproval; if not for the bitter notes of fear and mistrust that mingle with the dirt and sweat of two days of confinement, Lecter would suspect that Graham misunderstood his situation.

Graham finally switches tact, pushing his line of inquery out of the veil of semi-polite ambiguity to better hamstring Lecter from sidestepping him at every thrust and pointed query, to force him to openly ignore Graham's questions or to answer. “Why haven't you killed me yet?”

Lecter drags his knife through the hollandaise sauce petulantly. “...Do you want me to kill you?”

What he has heard of Graham's laughter is always so bitter, so harsh. He wonders if it has forever been so. “If only for the closure. You don't... keep people. You're a killer, not a kidnapper. You like things clean, efficient, and kidnapping, well, that's just messy. Sure, you might get an aristocratic pleasure from the most dangerous game, but escorting me to the bathroom isn't exactly thrilling, so why are you doing this?” His words run together, tempo beating faster and faster like a rabbit's heart. “And not just the kidnapping, but the talking- the pleasant fucking conversation over breakfast, the first-aid, the how-was-your-sleep, morning-after, sorry-for-strangling-you bullshit. Why are you being nice to me?”

“Did you prefer the violence?”

“It was less confusing.”

They watch each other over their cups and plates, neither looking away, though Graham is visibly shaking from the strain. He wonders what Graham sees in his eyes and what sounds Graham would make if he pulled Graham's out, what clever retort he would have at Lecter's hand sneaking under his ribcage to hold his heart.

“Oh,” Graham whispers. “You're a psychiatrist.”

Lecter's own heart skips a beat. “What makes you say that?”

“Medical training of some kind – you patched me up nicely, and we both know you could have hurt me much worse than you did, but you're not happy just messing with people's insides, are you? You want to play with their heads, too.”

Lecter smiles, which is as much agreement as he will give.

After cleaning up, Lecter picks up a knife (not one of his kitchen knives, perish the thought) and glides to stand behind Graham. No threatening moves, just slow invasion of Graham's personal space. Graham is nervous, certainly, but he doesn't tense, aware somehow that Lecter is not about to harm him. With one hand on either side of Graham's neck, he speaks. “I am going to release you, and then you are going to have a shower. Afterwards, I will not tie you again, though you will remain locked in the guest room when I away or otherwise indisposed. I am willing to provide you books; an intelligent mind needs stimulus, after all. However, last night will not happen again.”

Graham swallows loudly. “And if it does?”

“Then I break your hands.”

“Ah.”

Lecter marches him into the bathroom, where a small, polite pile of Graham's clothing sits on the counter. Graham side-eyes him but says nothing. When it is obvious that Lecter is not leaving, Graham glares. Lecter leans against the door and watches expectantly until Graham, blushing furiously, fumblingly takes off his shirt. “Always hated psychiatrists.”

Chapter 5

There are many ways to control a person. The most obvious and the most crude is that of physical force, an inefficient and shortsighted way of maintaining power. The possibility of violence must be constantly maintained in the mind of the target, and any threat to the aura of total control must be immediately and brutally eliminated. It is a dam constantly tested, constantly tried, and it is doomed to one day fall.

Another is that of simple analysis, an understanding of the target's character and habits, with careful adjustment of environmental factors to ensure appropriate outcomes, but on it's own it is a distastefully reactionary strategy, suffering from many of the same weaknesses of more physical methods in addition to unpredictability, and it is easily subverted by any intelligent being cognisant of the manipulation.

Thus far, Lecter's control of his unwilling guest has rested heavily on these two strategies. Graham has tested his restraints and his ability to match Graham in physical confrontation, and thus far his control has wavered but held. Graham is an intelligent individual, and he can be trusted not to make another similar attempt at escape now that his first has failed, at least until he uncovers another, more advantageous opportunity.

Lecter finds himself distracted that day. If he is at all inattentive with his patient, Madeline Schwartz, a young medical student with asperger's syndrome, she is, at least, unlikely to notice and less likely to care. A 'low-impact client' one might say, neither prone to the frequent crisises nor the emotional explosions that demand the most of a therapist's inner-resources, though he does not find such things draining, unlike many of his colleagues. Still, regardless of whether she would take offence, to ignore her would be rude.

She gestures extravagantly to illustrate a story about the dissection in yesterday's anatomy class, a dark blue stain spread vividly across the heel of her hand with spatter extending to the tips of her fingers, just under her short, blunt nails. “Long story short, I hid the liver in her desk, and I regret nothing.”
As he escorts her out of his office, his eyes linger on the Johns Hopkins patch on her bag; his own Alma Mater, but he does not reminisce, rather, he worries at a gap in his knowledge like an aching tooth.

It is a unfamiliar sensation, to be so exposed, to watch as Graham pries open hair-line cracks in his mask to peer at the man beneath. It's exhilarating, like the heavy moment before a first kiss, like dawning fear in the eyes of unwitting prey. It terrifies and delights him in equal measure, all the more for the novelty of his own reaction, but it also leaves him hollow, hungry for Graham's own secrets, his hidden thoughts, his whispered confidences. He knows the first fluttering embers of obsession for what they are, and he is struck by the twin impulse to nurture and stroke the flame and to smother it like an infant.

It has been over forty-eight hours since the kidnapping of Will Graham, though with the solitary life he led, it is unlikely that his absence was noted until much later, most likely at his

workplace. It has been long enough, in fact if not knowledge, for his disappearance to warrant the official notice of the police.

Lecter does not fear any investigation into Graham's sudden absence. While there are inconsistencies which might lead some to propose his departure was perhaps less than consensual on his part, the disappearance of an asocial, family-less man could likely be entirely innocent, and there is no way to connect Lecter to Graham. Indeed, part of the reason that serial killers are so very difficult to catch in contrast to the average man who kills for business or pleasure is the almost arbitrary nature of their chosen victims. To trace back to the killers from their victims is a near impossibility, as often, the killer never knew their victim to begin with.

However, he wonders about Graham's life before their most auspicious of meetings, where he worked, how he spent his hours away from his home, to whom he spoke. He itches to learn, to right the imbalance of knowledge between them. Normally it would not matter, one only needs so much information to hunt and to capture, and understanding his usual prey is no more than an exercise in banality, but to maintain honesty in the realm of his own mind, he must admit that this time it does indeed matter.

It is one thing to peruse the hysterical tabloid reports of the latest horrors of the Chesapeake Ripper, hidden among the multitude of gawking voyeurs feeding off of the gore and the violence of the killings, but to dig through the life of a man for which, by all rights, he had no reason to form any special interest for so little objective gain is an unnecessary risk, a ridiculous folly. Especially so soon after Graham's disappearance.

Graham is a teacher, subject unknown, not likely of an elementary or secondary school, a position working with so many children would be an unimaginable choice from a man of Graham's temperament, but if he taught at a university or college, would he not call himself professor? Lecter could risk an internet search, but what would it gain him? Only the added temptation of Graham's workplace and office.

This time when he enters the guest room after arriving home, he finds Graham, not prepared for a second ambush, but spread loose-limbed on the coverlet, *Moby Dick* sitting on his chest like a brick, rising and falling with every soft pull of his lungs. His hair is a tangled mess, and his thin shirt and shorts are rumpled and twisted from an earlier nightmare, the loose collar pulled out of place to expose most of one of Graham's shoulders.

Lecter plucks up the book and places it one the nightstand. The bed sinks under his weight as he pushes Graham's dishevelled hair into place, then places two fingers against Graham's neck, where he can feel the strong, steady pulse of blood through the carotid artery, just under soft, paper-thin skin, so close to the air. With his thumb he strokes against a sharp, angular jawline, and he exhales with the rough scrape of stubble against the healing incision that bisects it. Then, he straddles Graham, leans in, and wraps both hands around Graham's throat, not squeezing, just applying gentle pressure, feeling the muscle and cartilage, indexing the line of cervical vertabrae as they lead to the base of the skull, breathing in rhythm with the air flowing through Graham's trachea despite the constriction.

Graham's eyeslids flutter, and faint murmurs escape his lips. Lecter knows the moment Graham surfaces from stuttering awareness into true consciousness, because the muscle

below his fingers tenses and every breath pulled through Graham's nose gains in volume with his anxiety to fill his lungs. His fingers twitch futilely, not yet free of the paralysis of sleep. His eyes flash open for the briefest of moments before squeezing shut with a whimper.

“Shh... Shh...” Lecter murmurs. “It's all right, Will. Shh...”

Slowly, Graham's painfully tense muscles relax. Slowly, his breathing returns to normal. He watches Lecter through hooded eyes, and Lecter can feel him swallow through the palms of his hands. Slowly, slowly, his eyes close, and the rise and fall of his chest returns to the peaceful cadence of sleep.

Lecter pulls Graham's glasses from his nose and lays them folded atop the book. He bends and lays a swift peck against Graham's jugular vein before leaving to prepare dinner.

A third way to assure control is to alter the individual, to change the way that they think and act, to mold their perceptions and their being until they no longer fight, until they grow to accept the hand of their very conqueror. To break them and build them anew. It is a path requiring delicacy: too much, too fast, and the damage is irreparable.
And it would be such a shame to ruin him.

Chapter 6

When Graham watches him uncertainly from across the kitchen during breakfast, when he touches a furtive hand to his own throat, brow twisted in confusion, Lecter smiles back. Today's breakfast is a simple protein scramble (he desperately needs to re-stock his larder,) but Graham's reaction to the dish is a thing of almost *aggressive* apathy atop the low-grade suspicion with which Graham meets each and every friendly gesture.

Graham hasn't eaten since early the day before, as Lecter hadn't woken him for dinner, hadn't seen how disturbing the deep slumber of a man who, judging by the shadows lurking under his eyes, rarely attained such peace even in unconsciousness, could possibly endear him to Graham. Not that it was of much use: he heard Graham moving about in the depth of night. Pacing, perhaps.

“You look tired, Will. I'm sorry you did not sleep well.”

Graham sneers. “And I'm sure you're *very* concerned.”

“Are you always so rude when you are tired?” Lecter serves breakfast and seats himself.

“Nah, I'm just always rude.”

Graham wrinkles his nose at the plate, and Lecter watches him, expressionless. Graham chews on his lip lightly, thoughtfully, and that is all the warning there is that he is about to say something unfortunate. “How many people have you killed? Just a rough ball-park.”

As an attempt to anger him, it's quite deliberate. Lecter purses his lips.

“Or have you lost count?” Asks Graham with bared teeth and barer contempt.

“I do not keep score, William.”

“No, that would be vulgar.” There is a strangeness to Graham's words, a calm, detached tone and careful rhythm with a familiar shade of Europe. An odd, unconscious imitation of Lecter himself.

Lecter decides to act the bigger man and does not respond. He instead uses the French press to make Graham a cup of tea. “You should eat.”

“I'm not hungry, thanks.” Such bitter sarcasm is rarely a good look on anyone, but on Will Graham it has it's own sort of charm.

“Harming yourself to spite me? I had a much higher estimation of your sense, Will.” Lecter tuts. “Anxiety may suppress your appetite, but it does not eliminate the need.”
Graham eats sullenly, then swallows the tea with a grimace. He's used to sweeter drinks, but he doesn't ask for sugar. He ignores Lecter's attempts to make conversation, preferring to glower at his own plate.

Lecter smiles. “Let us retire to the den, shall we?”

Graham takes this as his cue to stand, but he stumbles and braces himself against the table. Lecter wraps an arm around his chest and pulls Graham's own over his shoulder. He half carries Graham to the couch and lowers them both before Graham falls.

Graham struggles to sit up, before sinking under the force of gravity and leaning heavily against Lecter. He moans, low and panicked, and struggles weakly as Lecter checks his pupils. He squawks and thrashes when Lecter nears his throat, but Lecter pins his hands easily and takes his pulse at the wrist instead. Graham's eyes roll in his head, skipping and scanning over the room, staring at horrors only he can see.

“Oh God, what did you feed me?”

“It was in the tea.”

“Fuck you. Fuck you and fuck your tea.” Graham tries to push away, but ends up clinging to his shoulder like a limpet

“You're having an unusual reaction.” He had intended to do this more subtly, had intended to slowly introduce the drug into Graham's system, and indeed, Graham had ingested a miniscule dosage, a fraction of what would normally required to produce such a response. However, if his years, decades really, of life as hunter of man had taught him anything, it was the importance of patience and planning, but also the need to adapt to changing circumstances. After all, that was what brought him Graham in the first place.

“Is this for insulting your cooking?”

“Now, you cannot believe I am so petty as that.”

“You kill people for the crime of poor manners. You are exactly as petty as that.” A thick layer of perspiration is already rising from his skin, which itself has taken on a frightful pallor.

Lecter wipes Graham's brow with a handkerchief. “If you experience a sensation not dissimilar to the rocking of a boat, it may help you to put one foot on the floor.”

“No, no, no, no...”

“You have nightmares, don't you, Will? Vivid ones. That imagination with a little hallucinogenic accelerant... What do you see? Won't you tell me?”
“Oh God, oh God, oh my God.”

Lecter threads his fingers through Graham's sweat-sodden hair, murmuring, “So marvellously suggestible, I wish I could just open the top of your skull and look at all of your secrets. Sadly, as a surgeon and as a psychiatrist I know that the physical structure would tell me nothing of the true scope of your gift even if perchance it led me to the cause.”

Graham claws at his own head with feeble fingers, and starts singing in warbling falsetto. *“I hate you, I hate you, I hate you.”*

Lecter continues to pet Graham, but he props a half-empty journal on the arm of the couch so he can write, surrounded by the soft interplay of Corelli's *sonate da camera* and Graham's own choked sobbing. A fine way to spend the morning by any estimation.

Though, some may disagree.

Graham stares out into the room, out into an ever-shifting sea of rotting, fetid corpses. Men and women, their eye-sockets empty, their chests open from collar to pelvis, their abdomens no more than gaping caverns where organs once hung and pulsed with life. Beside him, on a throne of sun-bleached skulls sits Hannibal, a dark emperor with a set of fine white antlers for a crown.

Chapter 7

They fall into a routine, host and house-guest.

Graham is quiet in the week following the incident in the den, furious and sullen. He speaks only when spoken to, and then he is recalcitrant and laconic, resorting to physical gestures, nods and shrugs, rather than words whenever possible. His front of anger is belied, however, by the way he watches dark corners then glances at Lecter, testing his reality against Lecter's reactions, in his estrangement from his life and his routine subconsciously coming to rely on the perceptions of his new, narrowed social group.

Lecter unlocks Graham's door twice a day, first at breakfast, taken casually in the kitchen, then late in the evening for dinner in the more formal dining room. He spends his days much as he always has, with patients, with countless demands on his attention through his active social life, with observation of the habits of the unpleasant receptionist at the nearby optometrist's office. (He's considering preparing some *Pâté en croûte* for later in the week.) Graham spends the intervening time in isolation, though even the short duration their meals together nevertheless test his under-developed people skills and atrophied reserves, so more would likely prove unbearable.

Guardedly, Graham begins speaking again, though with more care to his words and actions. The poor man is always somewhere between unwilling and unable to conform to social expectation, and even when he shies away from proven triggers, actions that have previously drawn Lecter's displeasure, his groping attempts at politesse have all the art of a clumsy adolescent in the backseat of a car, and they do nothing to disguise how distasteful he finds it all. He has good instinct for what he lacks in finesse, cautiously probing for Lecter's boundaries. His one comment on a dish of anticuchos is "Don't you ever just have fried chicken?" and after he gets away with that, Lecter's only response a dry smile, his manner becomes steadily more assured, more bold.

It isn't that he doesn't understand people, oh no, he understands Lecter quite well, even if he's yet to grasp some pertinent details, but rather that his understanding has never translated to ability in the delicate dance of lies and manipulation required by the social landscape.

There are many conditions which bear the symptom of inhibited social development, but words like schyzotypal, anxious, and avoidant fit him like ill-tailored coats. Of them all, autistic is perhaps the closest. Of course, a key component, found widespread throughout the myriad manifestations of autism, is that of a deficiency in a particular form of empathy in which Graham has thoroughly demonstrated not a deficit, but a profound aptitude: the ability to create an accurate mental model for the emotional and psychological states of others. So much so that it hurts him, disgusts him even. His ignorance of Graham's life rankles, because Graham has clearly met men like Lecter, lesser killers, murderers, and psychopaths, and he has understood them all.

He is reminded of Madeline Schwartz, not in personality, for she is a cheerful, morbid child to Graham's bitter, horrified maturity, but rather in how she had once described the

experience of holding eye-contact: like staring into the sun, like overloading a computer without a surge protector, an overwhelming rush of data, too much, too fast to process, and so she turns away.

But that's not why Graham turns away, is it? No. He sees. He understands. He just doesn't want to.

Will Graham is a man whose mind can swallow the sun.

Chapter 8

They fall into a routine, captor and captive.

Graham spends his nights the way he has since he has been old enough to know the word nightmare, shaking and sweating in the claws of a terrible fear that grows stronger with every corpse he witnesses, with every murder he relives, with every monster he becomes. It had been... not good, but better since he had left the force. Still, no matter how fast you run, you'll never escape a beast that's made it's den deep in your own head.

Now, however, he wakes only to find himself deep within another bad dream. His days are monotonous, each indistinguishable from the next, and he has taken to scratching gouges into the expensive wallpaper to mark the pass of time, one gouge for every meal with his... host. The room is a luxurious marriage of classic tastes and modern elegance, sleek and refined with warm, mature colours and pleasing ornamentation. All very understated and genteel, of course, even to his inexpert eye. The good doctor is ever a man of wealth and taste.

Graham hasn't found any useful tools nor viable weapons, and he's closely supervised whenever he's beyond these four walls. The only suitably sharp objects are the cutting knives in the kitchen and the limited cutlery he receives at meals, but he's restricted to his seat while watching Hannibal cook and monitored while eating. No chance of sneaking away a knife or a fork, not when Hannibal sets and clears the table, two plates, two glasses, two spoons, two forks, one knife.

From what he's seen of the layout of the house, the back wall most likely forms part of the exterior wall of the house, and on the other side lies freedom. That being said, as he found out during the first hours he spent pacing his lavish prison, it's also either extremely thick, made of some dense material such as rock or concrete, or purposely soundproofed: his ear pressed against the plaster, he can hear nothing of the world beyond.

The same cannot be said for the wall opposite. In what he can only assume is the morning for the lack of windows, he hears the quiet tread of sock feet on their way to the bathroom, and he wonders what happened to the shoes he woke up without, whether that was an intentional move to further hamper the possibility of escape, in the evening he hears soft music filtering through the house, always something demure and refined. In the day though, there's nothing, not a sound. No humans, no dogs, no traffic, no birds. He's trapped with the in and out of his own breathing, the erratic thump of his own heart, and the gurgling churn of his own digestive system in this unholy vacuum of sound.

He never thought he'd miss people. He doesn't, really. He misses the dogs more than anything, but he'd take every idiot, gossiping whisper of his students – *cute, too bad he's a fucking psycho, you know?* – to rid himself of this damned silence.

He hums and sings, sometimes, just to hear it, just to know he hasn't gone deaf or simply disappeared, his consciousness carrying on without a body or a voice. Once he finds himself

carrying on conversation with a small statue of a stag, the only part of the decor with a face, but he stops the second he realizes what he's doing.

Graham avoids thinking about him, his jailer, when he's alone. The thing is, he's never spent so much time uninterrupted in a single individual's personal domain, the place that they've shaped after the inner contours of their psyche. This isn't the real man so much as it is the tastes of a persona he has created for himself, a complementary accessory to the mask he wears into the world, but Graham can still feel his mind, heavy and oppressive like water, filling him and displacing his own thoughts until they spill like oil out of the top of his head.

Hannibal. The forced intimacy of his first name for lack of any other appellation is galling, but the little game behind it even more so. He dislikes, mistrusts the two-person drama of amiable acquaintanceship, but at the same time, he knows he needs to play into it, needs to bide his time until he spots a chance to slip his lead. Above all, he can't risk Hannibal's anger, or worse, his boredom. He still fights Hannibal, still argues and snipes, if only to keep a grip on where he ends and where Hannibal begins, but he tries to be smart about it.

So he behaves, makes conversation, and bends to Hannibal's strange whims. The food is good, but he's never had so much pate, so many hearts, lungs, tongues, and *glands* in his life. He misses simple things: stew, collared greens, fritters, sweet potatoes, *meat that comes from the back of an animal rather than its gut*. He tries to be at least somewhat appreciative whenever Hannibal makes a dish he half-way recognizes. He falls on the food the first time Hannibal serves lobster a la creole, to Hannibal's bemusement. It's still too fancy by half, but at least he knows what it is. He'd heard food in Louisiana was well related to the cuisine of France, but apparently the two are cousins a few times removed at best.

He balks, however, the next time Hannibal sets a delicate little teacup beside his hand, two weeks after the first.

He stares at the tea like it's a snake curling around his arm.

“Is everything all right, Will?” Asks Hannibal, calm and pleasant as ever, a whisper of impending violence lurking in the shadow of his words.

Graham swallows hard. “No.” *No, I won't drink it.*

“Will.”

“No!”

Hannibal's hands land on his shoulder and squeeze in a gesture of mock comfort. “You have no choice in this. I know that. You know that. Now...” Hannibal curls one hand around his windpipe and with the other brings the cup to his lips. He drinks, Hannibal stroking his neck and making sweet shushing sounds against the crown of his head.

It isn't as bad as last time, lending credence to Hannibal's claim that he had not intended Graham's previous reaction, but to say so is a lot like saying that losing a hand isn't as bad as losing a leg. Rather than a multi-sensory, hallucinatory horror-show, he experiences a drifting

sense of blurred irreality, the colours of the kitchen alternately grainy and over-saturated like one of those stupid photos his coworkers sometimes took of their lunch.

He's calmer this time. He shouldn't be, not when there are maggots tunnelling beneath his skin. The surface of his arm doesn't move as he watches, even when it should be full to bursting with tiny worms as they hatch and crawl and feed on his necrotic flesh, but he can feel them moving. Hannibal has finally killed him, then. He's dead. It's almost a relief.

After cleaning the kitchen, Hannibal hangs up his apron and steers Graham towards the bathroom. He doesn't stumble, but he can't feel his feet because they're too far away.

“Don't touch me,” He murmurs. “Or they'll eat you, too.” *They'll eat you from the inside out, and they'll leave a pretty, cultured shell, because that's where the rot and sickness is: it starts in your heart, in your mind, and it spreads. No slick veneer can erase the putrefaction of your soul, they'll dig in and find it.* A bright soap-bubble of hysteria wells in his chest, but it can't break the surface.

Hannibal smiles at him. Graham can't see his antlers, but that doesn't mean they aren't there. “You need a shower, dear William.”

Graham blinks, nods, and does nothing.

“For that,” Continues Hannibal, “You may need to remove your clothes.”

“Oh,” Graham looks down at his shirt. He doesn't want to see what's lying the well-worn plaid, doesn't want to see his empty gut and his gaping, exposed ribcage. “I suppose that's true.”

Hannibal tuts, rolls up his sleeves, and begins to unbutton Graham's shirt with the practised ease of one well-versed in removing clothing from the reluctant and the unresponsive, unmindful of the dark blood that stains him to the elbow. Graham wants to get angry, wants to get embarrassed, but he can't quite remember how. When Hannibal leans forward to push the shirt off his shoulders, he tucks his nose into where Hannibal's neck meets his shoulder and inhales deeply, his mouth watering and his bones aching with an unmentionable hunger at the scent of judiciously applied cologne and clean, healthy human. His voice is not his own, low and unrecognizable, when he whispers, “I want-”

Hannibal wraps one arm around his naked shoulders and slides the other hand up to cradle his skull.

“What do you want, Will?” He asks clinically.

“I want to pull out your eyes,” Graham says fervently, “And then I want to eat them.”

Hannibal chuckles and ruffles his hair before unbuttoning his pants and helping him step out of them. Graham removes his own underwear and stands shivering and nude in the mild, warm air while Hannibal runs a bath. Eventually, he manoeuvres Graham into the tub.

He doesn't mean to ask – he won't give Hannibal the satisfaction of his curiousity – but it slips out without his permission. “What's your other name?”

Hannibal stares at him with a curious expression, as though contemplating his meaning, then tilts his head and says, “Lecter.”

“Lecter. Doctor Lecter. Doctor Hannibal Lecter.”

“Just Hannibal, Will.”

“I hate you,” Graham mutters sullenly. Doctor Hannibal Lecter presses a chaste kiss to his forehead, and the devil of his own personal hell lovingly washes his hair.

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Lecter cares for his patients, after his own fashion. They are petty, insipid creatures, dull and lacking in natural curiosity, but, by the same measure, they are largely inoffensive and given to rare flashes of brilliance. It is perhaps analogous to what Graham must feel for his dogs. These strange, broken creatures who come to him for comfort: he feels a duty to them. An obligation to their well-being while they are under his care.

Franklin Froidevaux, a recent referral from a colleague, for instance, has an uncanny sense for dangerous individuals, not merely those who are untrustworthy, but those genuine predators who stalk humanity. Due to his heightened anxiety, his most distressing hyper-vigilance, he intuits the presence of a monster much like a wary gazelle senses the lioness in the grass long before she strikes. However, social expectations and Froidevaux's own second-guessing have hampered his capacity to recognize and act on this knowledge. There is even perhaps an element of cognitive dissonance: he is intrigued and awed by the cool control of a calculated killer, even if he does not see it as such.

As a matter of course, one creates a physical and emotional distance between one and one's patients as a psychiatrist and as a professional, but he is particularly strict in this with Froidevaux, a touch more distant than he might be with another patient, so as to better curb Froidvaux's growing fascination.

During their first few sessions, he was despondent, jilted by yet another psychiatrist, but recently he has grown... affectionate. Prone to laughing and joking, to wide smiles and lingering eye-contact. Intimate confidences with one's psychiatrist are normal, of course, but they are quickly taking a more personal tone, focusing more and more on Lecter himself. Froidevaux's fawning does not offend him, nor does it cause him any discomfort, but he can see it becoming problematic in the future. For now, though, it is harmless.

Froidevaux lingers after their session. “So... there's an interesting exhibit down at the art museum right now, and I hear it's quite something...”

“The photography collection by Candida Höfer, yes? Are you going?” He ushers Froidevaux out, never allowing him time to respond. Impolite, strictly speaking, but justified by circumstances. “Do have a wonderful time, Franklin.”

“Doctor Lecter, I-” With a note of finality, Lecter shuts the door.

Straightening his jacket, he fetches a clean tissue in order to collect the crumpled one left on the table. Though Froidevaux pushes against the limits of their time and their relationship, Lecter polices him strictly. To do otherwise is to invite chaos and to admit weakness, which is more than such clumsy manipulation deserves.

He turns on his phone to find a missed call from Alana Bloom.

She answers on the second ring, “Hannibal?”

“Alana. You called?”

“Yes...” She pauses, uncharacteristically uncertain. Bloom was once his student and is now his respected colleague, they have long earned each others' candour in professional matters. “I need your help with something.”

“Ah,” There is only one thing that she could mean. “Then another girl has been taken.”

“The seventh in as many months. How-?”

“Alana,” He chides fondly, “Never underestimate the lurid sensationalism of the media: the miseries of the world have ever been a constant preoccupation. And you would need assistance on no less than a true conundrum, though I wonder what, if anything, I could provide in this area. Surely you do not need your old professor looking over your shoulder.”

She laughs. “Modesty doesn't suit you, Doctor Lecter.”

“Modesty? Far from it. You've made a name for yourself as a forensic psychologist, Doctor Bloom. One that has reached me even here at my humble practice.”

“Please, Hannibal. What can I say to convince you to consult on this?”

Lecter leans against his desk and sighs and inaudible sigh. “You need not say anything. Of course I will do this for you. It should prove an interesting venture.”

“Thank you, Hannibal. Just- Thank you.”

There is a silence in which he catches the smallest hitch in Bloom's breathing. “What is it, Alana?”

“Could I ask you another favour? It's personal.”

“Tell me.”

“...It's better if I show you.”

Chapter End Notes

Franklin/Hannibal 5ever

There's a bit of a disagreement as to the spelling of Franklin/Franklyn's name. Is it Froidevaux (Cold valleys)? Or is it Froideveaux (cold veal)? I wish I could go with the

second, if only for the pun, but the street after which he is named is Benjamin Franklin and Froidevaux, so there is my choice.

Chapter 10

Fate is a duplicitous concept, a security blanket for the neurotic and the ignorant and a convenient excuse for the lazy and the unimaginative, those who cannot or will not comprehend the future as a spectrum of possibility, an ever-branching path rather than a simple linear progression from one moment to the next. Truly, though the present is singular, the future is legion.

Lecter does not think of fate when Alana Bloom drives him down an ill-used road to a familiar rustic house in Virginia, instead he thinks of serendipity.

They sit in the idling car for a long time before Bloom removes the key from the ignition and steps out into the pale twilight. He follows a few steps behind her, and when she stops, framed by the pillars of the front porch, he hangs back solemnly, respectfully until she breathes deeply and forges on.

To expose the bright sliver of excitement glowing deep in his breast would be reprehensibly crass.

Bloom wades slowly through the frozen effects, the cluttered sprawl of furniture chosen by comfort over aesthetic, now finely layered with dust. Her movements are soft and elegant, her footsteps silent in honour of this dead house, this shell of the life of a man who is not dead but is just as gone, as she traces the path of Lecter himself only a few weeks before. Their bodies disturb the stale air, as if, by their very presence, they offend this curious tomb.

“Why are we here, Alana?”

“I wasn't the first choice for a consultant on the kidnapping case. Jack Crawford wanted a colleague of mine at Quantico, Will Graham. Brilliant man. Taught forensic psychology.” She stands before the cold, soot-filled hearth and sighs through her nose. “Three weeks ago, Will Graham stopped showing up for his classes.”

“And this is his home.”

She nods. “Yes, he lived alone. Commuted ” Her smile is brittle. “He didn't care much for people.”

His voice is hushed and consoling. “What do you need from me?”

“This... This is the first time I've been back since I first came to check on him. The police aren't looking at it as a suspicious disappearance. No sign of a struggle, and-” She swallows hard. “He was considered unstable. But it's the strangest thing. No sign of a struggle, yes, but no sign of anything else, either. Food in the fridge, laundry in the dryer- I found his birth certificate in a tin upstairs. His dogs- I don't even know how many he had- they were wandering around outside, so he must have left the door open. It's odd, like he just walked out one day with the clothes on his back.” Bloom shakes her head. “But I almost started to believe it myself, that he really had just... left.”

“What changed?”

“This morning they found his car impounded in Baltimore. Eight different parking tickets, the first from the day he went missing.” There is a tension to her gentle face, born of anger and sadness below the mask of a true professional. So strong, even in vulnerability. “Now I don't know what to think.” She glances at him over her shoulder, her eyes over-bright, but her cheeks dry. “The FBI are making enquiries, but I really need an outside perspective. I need someone else to look at this.”

Lecter bows his head, running one hand over his own face. He looks at her with artful sympathy and says, “Alana, forgive me if I am wrong, but... is it possible that you had some affection for this Will Graham?”

“I wasn't in love with him.”

“Alana.” It's a rebuke, but a gentle one.

She closes her eyes, against what he does not know. “I wanted to be there for him. I wanted to be his friend. It was all hypotheticals and possibilities, but yes, I had 'some affection' for him. I liked him, and I care about what happened to him.”

“It is natural to grieve for what might have been.”

“It's more than that, though. Whatever else Will Graham was, he was a good person. He- he took on responsibilities, craved structure.” Her voice wavers and her shoulders shake. “I can't help but feel that something terrible has happened.”

“I am so sorry, Alana.” He reaches out, and she takes his hand in hers.

She laughs, a pathetic croaking thing, but her eyes are warm through her tears. “Don't be. It's not your fault. None of this is, and I'm feeling enough stupid, pointless guilt for the two of us.”

He squeezes her hand, bringing it to his chest. “Enough grief for now. All healing comes with time. We will meet tomorrow on a full nights sleep. Then we discuss these kidnappings and your Will Graham.”

“Thank you, Hannibal.”

Chapter 11

The pervasive smell of sweat which habitually permeates the guest room has taken on a different timber, tonight. He halts in the door-frame, closing his eyes and scenting the air. Instead of sharp adrenalin and bitter fear, there is the pungent aroma of masculine exertion.

Graham notices him immediately, judging from the taught tension that twists the muscle along his nude back, but he makes a show of finishing the current set of crunches before lunging for his shirt. He flushes deeply, dark red spreading down to his chest, a mixture of the increased flow through his vascular system and the embarrassment that comes from another's eyes laying one bare. Graham will not be caught jumping to Lecter's every whim, even as he plays the part of cooperative captive, and so he allows subservience and rejects servility in the same breath.

Still, Lecter's eyes cause him no small discomfort.

Lecter inhales deeply, like a true cognoscenti before a sip of wine, sifting through the emotions slipping from Graham's skin and into the air. Faint arousal – most likely from anger. Renewed nervous fear, now that Lecter has joined him – as usual, though milder and milder as Graham grows accustomed to Lecter's presence, a constant bubbling anxiety rather than sharp, spiking terror.

“You could afford a little subtlety.” Graham bares his teeth in a way far more befitting one of his dogs.

“Why should I hide? Despite contemporary social mores, there is nothing inherently perverse to the sense of smell, and I for one have always cherished the pleasures of all the sensory organs. To cultivate an aesthetic for each of the senses is art itself.”

Graham's smile fades into something more natural, albeit strained and awkward, a motion long-unpractised. “I'm not sure I'd call the way I smell right now art, doctor.” He pronounces the title mockingly. “You're late. Or are you? I can't tell anymore.”

“Mmm. I met an old friend.”

“Friend?”

“So surprised, that a psychopath might feel affection?”

Graham snorts. “You're not a psychopath. I don't think there is a word for you.”

Lecter smiles widely. “Nevertheless, you are right. Perhaps colleague is a better term.”

“You're certainly happy about it.” And there Graham's own smile retreats into a self-conscious frown. He dislikes mirroring Lecter's emotions and enjoying Lecter's company even more so, but that is a conscious dislike, following at the heels of a visceral response to being paid pleasant, non-judgemental attention. *Oh, but you were a lonely man.*

As Graham passes close to him, crossing the room to fetch trousers to cover his shorts, his brow furrows, in recognition, in confusion, but he dismisses whatever distant thought pulls at his mind in favour of putting as much distance as possible between Lecter and himself.

Ah. The faint hint of a woman's hand cream. Alana's.

Graham dresses quickly. “Perverse or not, polite it isn't. Fucking rude.”

Lecter would kill, and in fact has, for less of an insult. To name him hypocrite is no small charge. Nevertheless, he appreciates Graham's honest nature, even if on occasion it compels him to bluntly plow through acceptable social convention like an ill-mannered rhinoceros.

Lecter himself finds no discomfort in Graham's eyes on him as he prepares a pot of beuschel and warms a loaf of fresh bread, rather, he revels in the audience. Graham seeing him for what he is, a monster and a master. An artist in all things great and terrible. The thought of showing him more...

It is perhaps inevitable, that one day he should have to part with his strange stray, this scruffy teacher from Louisiana, that he shall have to paint his walls and his hands with the red-black spray of Graham's arteries. Either Graham will become too great a liability or Lecter himself will begin to bore. Regardless, he plans to savour every moment while it lasts.

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Lecter has never seriously considered eating Alana Bloom. He has wondered idly, as one does, whether she would taste as she smells, subtle and sweet, but that is no more than ordinary psychological conditioning. He has no true desire to have her for dinner as anything other than honoured guest. She is a wonderful woman, mannered yet assertive, intelligent yet kind. She is silk, a thing of beauty and strength.

She takes him to meet Jack Crawford, a familiar name, but one to which he has yet to put a face.

Crawford is a big man: tall with broad shoulders and imposing in his bearing. Passionate, a man who runs hot, a booming force in the minds of his subordinates, but cooler, more personable in the presence of one he would consider an equal.

“Doctor Lecter,” Crawford shakes Lecter's hand warmly. “You come to us highly recommended. It's good to have you on our side.”

Lecter smiles. “Likewise, Agent Crawford. Though I am unsure how much help I can truly be to professionals in the field, such as yourselves.”

“Please, Doctor. I've seen your work, and I've no doubt you'll be quite the asset.”

He spends the day in a small but well-lit room, profiling alongside Alana Bloom: male, older, white. He's patient, this kidnapper, this killer. Old enough not to be impulsive. Killers of this type tend to hunt within their own ethic group, and his seven victims – the first six no doubt long dead – are all white. More than that, they are near-indistinguishable, each an imperfect print of some long-misplaced master copy.

Bloom purses her lips. “We can't catch him with this.”

“No. We won't catch him until he makes a mistake or until our luck improves.”

“Until he takes another girl and another.” She shakes her head, not denying, simply disheartened.

“That is the sad truth of our kidnapper's puzzle. We may not know the shape of his truth until we have enough of the pieces.”

They talk afterwards, over coffee and under a blue sky. About the abductions, about Will Graham, and about the time they've spent apart. Lecter is her sounding-board, her comforting shoulder, her long-absent friend and adviser. It is near dark when they stand to leave.

“I've missed you, Hannibal.”

“And I you. Truly, I blame myself for not having kept in contact these past months.”

She laughs, the day having brought her to a brighter place for all its darkness. “Well, they do say it takes two to tango.”

“Do they now?”

“Yes, they do, and if you're serious about keeping in touch, then you should invite me over for dinner.”

“But of course, Alana.” He winks. “But later in the week. You must give me time to prepare a proper reunion.”

They part with an embrace which surprises Bloom, but also which she returns whole-heartedly. “I missed you too, Hannibal.”

Chapter End Notes

“Please, Doctor. I've seen your work, and I've no doubt you'll be quite the ass-hat.”*

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

On the simplest, most shallow level, it is easy to see how Lecter slips below the radar, how a man of his inclinations could not only function in society but attain no small status as a doctor and an intellectual. He's a charming, cultured man, well-versed in art, science, and philosophy. He is reserved and refined, but not given to elitism and snobbery. Like a handsome spider in his web, offering to all the flies the sweet illusion that they can be as he, noble creatures of elegance and grace.

Graham wishes he couldn't see the appeal, the draw of the charming, personable veil under which the beast lurks. Still, the suspicious little voice of a poor southern boy hisses about fine folk and their genteel cruelty, even outside his conscious knowledge of Lecter's bad habits.

In many ways, Lecter is perfectly sane. He neither misunderstands nor misperceives the world around him, no. Lecter simply operates within a moral framework so skewed, so alien, that, from a normal understanding of right and wrong, it is virtually unrecognizable. No matter how dark his soul, no matter how warped his intentions, no matter what violence his eyes promise, Lecter maintains an almost preternatural politeness. Perhaps the oddest manifestation of this bizarre, malformed chivalry is his insistence on treating Graham as a guest insofar as it also meets his standards for maintaining control.

Lecter keeps him locked away, confined in a small bedroom, but leaves him untied and amply entertained with an occasionally eclectic selection of literature – *Beowulf, Life of Pi, American Psycho, Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe* – as well as a few tomes of psychology. Lecter feeds him, clothes him, allows him uncomfortably close-monitored time in the shower, none of which their situation obligates him to do, and it sets Graham's teeth on edge.

If Lecter wants something beyond the simple satisfaction of his curiosity, he hasn't said.

Lecter's been pleased lately. Chipper. An unpredictable mood. It makes Graham watch the glittering razor in Lecter's hand all the closer. “Is that really necessary?”

Lecter lays the flat of the blade along his palm. “Necessary? No. Few fine things are truly necessary in this life, and this is a very fine thing. A Dorko, from Germany.” Lecter grips Graham's chin, spreading strong fingers along his jaw and tilting his face to the light. “And while the bushman look does become you, I believe it is now occasion for something tidier.”

Graham's knuckles whiten as his hands clench on the arms of the chair. He remains untied, and with Lecter's proximity, his chances of success are reasonable should he initiate a physical confrontation, but with Lecter's formidable abilities and the knife in Lecter's hands, failure would likely prove lethal.

The cream has the characteristic chill of menthol and smells strongly of eucalyptus. Lecter applies it with a brush, then pushes Graham's head back to bare his throat. As the blade passes down the thin skin, the bare tenth of an inch separating blood and air, in smooth, confident strokes, Lecter begins to speak. Graham doesn't hear most of it, his mind whited-out with terror. "...I don't suppose you've ever been to Florence, more's the shame. A beautiful city, not solely in form but also in culture. Breathtaking. I should like to return there one day."

Graham doesn't dare speak.

Lecter cleans the razor and turns his attention to the other side of Graham's neck, just above the veins and arteries. Lecter reminisces; Graham doesn't dare speak. "Though, Venice too has it's own charms. I killed a man the third night of carnival, one of the first festivals since the tradition recommenced. He was seventeen, a classmate; I was little more than a boy myself. I snapped his neck in the middle of the crowd – all seeing but none realizing the truth of my action – I took his face and hid his corpse in one of the canals-"

And Graham can see it, can see the lights, the colours, the look of surprise in the young man's eyes below his elaborate mask, can hear the snap of vertebrae, feel the muscle tear. Graham knows his crimes: belligerent stupidity, crude inhospitality, and the audacity to think that a rich father and a pretty face gave him leave to anything he wanted, no matter how ugly his actions. He falls into Graham's arms, his last breath a soft "Oh." Finally sweet in death. Far away, in a heavy wooden chair letting himself be shaved by a serial killer with a straight razor, Will Graham gasps and shakes.

Lecter shushes him, comforts him, watches him with curious, smiling eyes, and clears his face with swift, professional strokes. As he reapplies the cream, he murmurs, "I have another guest for dinner in two days. Either you may be drugged, you may be tied and gagged, or, if you are willing to cooperate, you may simply be left to your own devices for the evening." Lecter begins another pass with the razor. "Know, that if you make any sound, any attempt to communicate, I will kill her." All this he says regretfully, as if it is Graham who forces him to act the monster. Lecter cleans the blade slowly, waiting on Graham's response.

His Adam's apple bobs nervously. "Understood."

Lecter smiles and completes the last few strokes. Finished, he runs his thumb along Graham's clean jaw. "You are a very handsome man, Will. I should like to see you in a suit and tie."

"I didn't take you as the type to dress your pets up, Doctor." He's pale, shaken, and the words come out weaker than he means. He reaches up to feel the newly bared skin – his own father had taught him to shave with a plastic safety razor and cheap cream that came in a can with a ship on the side – and his hand touches Lecter's, holding it in place against his cheek.

Lecter watches him, expressionless and silent, and he quickly removes the hand. "Sorry."

"Nonsense. You do nothing to offend." He grips Graham's shoulder firmly, rubbing soothing circles with his thumb. "Now, breakfast."

Chapter End Notes

Is "shaving" a fetish that people have? Is "being shaved by a murderous cannibal?"

Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

This is going to get a bit gory, gents.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

As much as he respects and revers the wisdom and art of antiquity, Lecter is equally a man of the present, welcoming the light of modern knowledge and the great and terrible efficiency of modern technology. However, no matter how he delights in the fruits of contemporary culture, he does not relish in how they encourage rudeness.

It is a point of professional pride that he does not allow anything to interrupt his time with his patients. For the hour, he is theirs. Theirs to talk to, theirs to confide in, theirs to tell all their deepest woes and darkest imaginings.

He has no less respect in other ventures.

Aaron Russo. Receptionist, former fiancé of a shy young woman who works as a legal aid in a moderately-prestigious law firm, and a chronic gambler who had burned through that young woman's life savings and personal credit before very publicly ending their relationship. Humiliating her for the crime of being of no further use.

Now, Lecter understands humiliation. He understands the deep satisfaction of taking the high, taking the arrogant, taking the irreparably self-pleased and breaking them, stripping them down until they are no more than weeping children, and then, as they beg for forgiveness, snuffing out the snivelling existence they failed to justify.

Humiliating the meek serves no purpose but to flatter the vanity of petty tyrants.

Russo returns to his apartment early in the morning after sleeping off the excesses of the night before on the sticky floor of one of Baltimore's less reputable drinking establishments. He stumbles bleary-eyed from the elevator to he door which he unlocks fumblingly then throws wide, relying on its weight to close it behind him. He opens the tap and sticks his head in the sink, not bothering with a glass, just drinking to chase the taste of vomit and death from his mouth. He throws his phone on the counter-top and leaves the water running as he slips into the living room to close the curtains.

Too late, he sees Lecter behind him in the reflection of the window, looming like the shadow of death; he turns quickly, but it does nothing but improve Lecter's access to his larynx. Russo produces not but a muted gurgle as Lecter slams the back of his head into the glass with a crunch, hard enough to impair, but not enough to incapacitate or kill. Lecter now

closes the curtains and strips Russo of his shirt before stringing him up by his wrists to the curtain rod with a length of copper wire from the kitchen.

He holds the freshly-honed hunting knife in one gloved hand, overcome by reverent anticipation – oh, it has been too long, too long since he dealt one of these insects, showed them for the miserable creatures they are, weeks even before he took Graham – he has learned patience with age, has learned caution with the too-close gropings of Miriam Lass, but he is in no mood for subtlety, for clandestine disappearance instead of the comeuppance he craves. He will hide his signature, hide his face by hollowing out Mr. Russo, taking all that his belly contains and separating the unusable, including the liver and kidneys that Russo has no doubt already damaged severely, to throw out later. Homicide is not a federal crime, and if Russo's death is not linked to the ripper, then he should remain well under the radar of Uncle Jack.

Before that though, Russo owes much, and he will give his pound of flesh.

Russo struggles weakly as the knife cuts through his skin like water, but Lecter pays him little mind: he is too weak and disoriented to pose a threat and physically incapable of summoning help. Lecter thinks instead of Graham, of skinning Graham this way, of taking him apart, piece by piece. He doesn't know if he could calmly place Graham's fallen flesh into a resealable plastic bag as he does now with Russo's, doesn't know if he could resist placing each piece in his mouth as it came off, cementing his place in the third circle of the inferno as he gluts himself on the meat.

Much as with intercourse, there is a different level of intimacy in killing someone whom one knows. In some ways, he gets to know victims like Russo, but in many others, that knowledge pales before the relationships he has formed with Alana Bloom, Bedelia Du Maurier, and Will Graham. He could not feign indifference in any one of their deaths.

He stumbles upon a new fantasy, and it makes his breath come fast, exciting in a way entirely different from that of finally engaging in his true “modus operandi.” Graham not below his knife, but holding it; Lecter not killing Graham, but killing with Graham at his side. He sees himself, rubbing blood into Graham's smooth cheek. He would be deeply chagrined to be seen in such a state, but Russo has long succumbed to blood loss, and for all intents and purposes, Lecter is alone.

He cleans up efficiently but with all due care, wrapping up blood splattered plastic, concealing tightly sealed organs, and leaving behind nothing that he has brought. He puts on a new pair of gloves and opens the curtains before leaving just as he came.

It is only after returning to his office, having disposed of the unnecessary pieces of Aaron Russo, that he notices the missed call from Agent Crawford. Or rather, the twelve missed calls and thirty messages. Undoubtedly something to do with the abductions, judging from Crawford's impatience. The man is far more polite outside of work, which only proves that he clearly knows how it is done and leaves his behaviour no excuse. Lecter resolves to call him before his next appointment and begins placing the rest of Russo's organs into a small cooler. Perhaps he will invite Crawford to dinner as well.

Chapter End Notes

Lecter's one of those characters where you find yourself asking: is this too disturbing? Or is it not quite disturbing enough?

I still do not know.

Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Lecter spends several hours of the day of his dinner with Bloom in the kitchen, submersing himself in the calm, centred state that such a demanding, yet soothing task brings. Normally, he would bring Graham out for the sake of an audience, but given recent revelations, he has decided to take the time for self-examination.

He is a man of strong emotion, a man of passion. What he cares about, he cares about deeply: manners, good taste, good conversation, a fine glass of Sangiovese. However, he is not ruled by those passions. He refuses. He indulges when and where and in whatever fashion it is safe to do so, but he will not be manipulated, not even by his own emotions. He is control.

That is, after all, why not two years ago he retired the Chesapeake Ripper.

He had so enjoyed the Ripper. Transforming humanity's unsightly blemishes into high art. Reading his message in bold on every front page from the tabloids to the Times. Walking unseen through Baltimore high society, unknown, unrecognized, but with his deeds, his masterpieces, on everyone's lips.

But sadly, even the best of games must come to an end.

By the classifications developed by the best and the brightest at the FBI, he is an organized, rather than a disorganized or mixed serial killer – and what puerile mind created such an over-simplistic model for understanding such a complex phenomena, he shall never know – but in their grasping attempts to categorize and quantify, they lose all nuance, all understanding. They do not see the beauty of it, the art. Like immature students first faced with a Van Gogh, their analysis fails to capture the subtleties and drive of the piece.

He loses himself, for a time, in julienning the vegetables. The concentration needed to achieve a pleasant, regular shape forces him to reject his anger, to remember his control.

It is a momentary temptation to end this experiment, this flirtation with emotional intimacy, to walk down the hall with the French knife and drag Graham to the kitchen. Graham would know instantly what he had come to do, would fight, but nevertheless he would fall. Lecter dismisses the thought just as quickly. It is an impulse born of uncertainty, of fear. He has discovered something new of himself, something bewildering and unexpected, but he cannot deny a part of himself simply because it changes all that he had thought that he knew. If he is to live fully, it must be, as Plato said through the mouth of his mentor Socrates, a life examined.

He must not fear himself.

He has come to enjoy Graham's company. He has come to enjoy the domesticity of having someone to feed and look after. He has come to enjoy their conversations and their verbal

sparring. No matter how rude, how spiteful Graham might be, he knows Lecter for what he is, he insults him and belittles him for what he is and what he has done, not for what he appears to be. Graham not only understands but appreciates the nature of the killer that Lecter is, and that is a heady thing.

Lecter has... become attached.

Graham has been more cooperative, of late, but Lecter has no doubt that it is primarily a ploy to lower his defences so that Graham might take the advantage in their game. Graham guards his true feelings behind a veil of grudging amiability. Lecter shall have to be no less guarded if he is to avoid manipulation.

The doorbell calls him to the foyer, where Bloom greets him with a smile beyond the door. “Alana, do come in. I extended an invitation likewise to Agent Crawford; however, he declined, citing work, so I have the delight of your company all to myself.” He brings her hand to his mouth in a gentle kiss. “I hate to ask, but would you know the reason? I was of the impression we had no new leads in the case.”

Bloom smiles coyly, knowingly. “You just want me to soothe that massive ego of yours.”

“Perhaps.” He leads her into the kitchen and offers her a drink. She accepts a fine, home-brewed barley wine.

“I doubt it was anything personal, Hannibal. I can't imagine turning down your cooking if there was any other option.” She drinks with the appreciation of an experienced palate. “Mmm... I haven't heard of anything new either, but they have been canvasing the colleges in the area, working on the angle that that's where they were abducted from.”

“Ah, well. Never fear, one day I shall lure him to my table. Now, enough shop talk. I have some Goreng Paru Berempah that I am sure you will find divine.”

Bloom sits across from Graham's usual seat, and it is strangely fitting. It is a silly, absurd thought, that he is not so unlike Poe's smiling killer, who charms those who search for his victim while the corpse's heart thrums beneath his very feet, though, Lecter's is a different sort of madness, if one would call it such. It is intoxicating, and he half-wishes he could hear Graham's heart beat through the walls; Lecter can smell him, faintly, sweet musk and perspiration, his trace intertwined with the room itself after dining here night after night, only magnifying the thrill. It is not entirely unlike that of feeding grieving parents the liver of their vulgar spawn, as he did with that accountant.

He *will* have to have Crawford for dinner.

It is a joy, as always, to watch Bloom eats. She is so free in her enjoyment, so open in her praise. It does him good to nourish an old protegée, to be nourished in turn by her presence and wit. They talk long into the evening, and it is almost a disappointment to see her go.

However, he has a special treat planned for dessert, and he wouldn't share this for the world.

In the cloying air of the guest room, Graham's anger is a palpable thing, filling Lecter's lungs with every inhale even as Graham sits curled into himself in the far corner. Lecter still can't hear his heart, but each rough breath is a sweet note, a beautiful melody even without its beat. “Hello, Will. How was your day?”

Lecter may not have been able to hear Graham from the dining room, but oh, Graham could hear them: every word, every shared joke, every echoing laugh.

“Why.”

“I think you can tell me that, Will.”

“You can't threaten me with her. You don't want her to die either.” Graham's glittering eyes stay trained to the floor. He looks so desperately young clean-shaven. “That's why you smelled like her.”

“I had to be certain of your reaction.” And quite a reaction it was: dilated pupils, hormone-laden sweat, and increased respiration. Far more than simple admiration. Lecter feet bring him to stand above Graham, who is at once small, afraid, and defensive and coiled and shaking with hot rage, his handsome, boyish face twisted with emotion.

“Most people don't need to know somebody to care whether or not they die.”

“Ah, but we are not most people.”

“I'm not like you.”

“No, but the difference is not so great as you would like it, is it, dear William?” Lecter crouches and runs a hand through Graham's wild hair.

The blow is not unexpected, an open-handed strike to Lecter's jaw followed by the rake of untrimmed nails along his hairline as Graham's full weight brings him to the floor. Before Graham can achieve a pin, Lecter kicks him, hard, to clear some space to maneuver, but Lecter has barely crawled to his knees when Graham lands on him once more, sinking his teeth deep into Lecter's shoulder, releasing the metallic sent of blood. Lecter twists and claws at Graham's face; Graham hisses, and his glasses skitter across the floor.

Lecter struggles to turn, to face Graham, kicking and thrashing inelegantly as Graham struggles in turn to hold him down. Graham is strong in his anger, but unfocused. Lecter gains enough leverage to slam the heel of his hand into Graham's nose, once, twice, and dark red blooms from both nostrils. A blow to Graham's diaphragm leaves him crumpled and gasping, and Lecter pushes him off.

Lecter stands carefully and fixes his suit and his hair. He watches Graham with the caution of a wary snake who has come upon a wounded mongoose. Graham's breathing returns to normal, but he stays curled on the floor. His voice is rough when he begins to speak.

“You'll make a mistake eventually. You're only human.”

Lecter stands next to him, simply observing, and Graham shakes so sweetly. Drops of what can only be tears hit the floor silently, one by one, in time with the steady drip of blood. Lecter smooths a hand down Graham's back and stoops to whisper in his ear. “The flaw in your argument, Will, is not in it's conclusion, but in its premise. I am far more than human.” He nuzzles Graham's jaw and breathes, pulling the warm, coppery smell deep into his lungs, then retreats to his own room, leaving Graham on the floor.

Lecter strips to the waist before the mirror in the master bathroom, cataloguing bruises and scrapes: a superficial scratch across his forehead, more substantial bruising up his back and along his jaw. Little flecks of Graham's blood lie scattered about his neck and face; he collects them on his fingertips and pushes them into his mouth. His shoulder bears the dark imprint of Graham's teeth like a bruised crown, distinct even despite several layers of fabric. It still bleeds sluggishly, and Lecter kneads his fingers into the wound and croons. He cleans his injuries slowly, particularly the bite, then replaces his shirt with a clean specimen, wets a clean towel, fills a glass of water, and returns to the guest room.

Graham is as Lecter left him, and Lecter lifts his chin so that he may wipe away the blood and tears – such a waste, but – *soon*, he promises himself, *soon.* He helps Graham up and sits him on the bed. He instructs Graham to hold the cloth in place, pinching his nose to staunch the bleeding, then unbuttons Graham's shirt to look at the damage. The bruising is extensive, but the ribs are undamaged and there is nothing to indicate internal bleeding. Nevertheless, Lecter will stay up with him a few hours to be certain. He fetches the glass of water from were he left it on the floor and Graham's glasses from where they fell and places them on the nightstand. “It is best if I don't give you a analgesic just yet. You must tell me if the pain becomes worse or if it is too much to bear. I want you to drink, if you can, to replace your fluids.” Lecter runs his hand once more through Graham's curls, and this time Graham makes no protest. “Would you like anything to eat?”

Graham shakes his head carefully, so as to not further injure himself. “No, thank you.”

Lecter smiles.

Chapter End Notes

A chapter longer than 1k. Shocking, I know.

Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Lecter's morning is characterized by a strange warmth, an energy to every step despite the late night and the grey sky of morning. He is woken by his own internal clock, and wraps himself in his robe before walking to the bathroom down the hall for a shower. The bite has blossomed in the night, robing itself in an palette of exquisite purples – a dark Byzantium which fades into a reddish pansy – and the mark of every incisor stands in sharp relief. He fingers it and relishes the dull pain while flecks of dried blood run into the drain. The ache is a reminder, both of his altercation with Graham and the irresistible passage of time, like the current of a swift stream, which has brought him to where he is.

He is not as young as he once was, but he does not regret.

He dresses without hurry, savouring this as he does all things good and pleasurable. He folds and tucks the pocket square, pansy paisley, into the dark purple of his suit jacket, and continues on to the guest room. He unlocks the door, turns the handle, and pushes, only for the door to stop with a thump with a half-inch of clearance, any viewf of the room beyond blocked by what can only be the back of the dresser or the bookcase. Pushing harder delivers no give.

Lecter closes the door and knocks.

Nothing.

He knocks again, louder, but well within the bounds of politeness.

“I would kindly thank you to fuck off, Doctor.”

Lecter frowns. Graham has taken equal control of the entrance, has responded to Lecter's sovereign power over the doorway with a barricade. Lecter's options now are simple, if he would enter. Either he must convince Graham to surrender and remove the amassed furniture, or he must dismantle one of the walls, the unfortunate design of most bedrooms leaving the hinges on the inside. The second is inconvenient and expensive and the first no doubt a lengthy process given Graham's stubborn streak. Lecter has a reasonable variety of power tools in the basement; he could certainly cut through, or-

Or... he could do nothing.

Lecter runs the palm of his hand down the grain of the door. He laughs softly.

Lecter has leftovers for breakfast, reheated in a pan on the stove-top, since Graham won't be joining him. He saves his most impressive for an audience. After cleaning the dishes, he reads the newest article by the ambitious if ethically dubious Freddie Lounds who, as always,

has the latest and juiciest to whet the American public's morbid appetite for shock and misery, then calls Jack Crawford.

He leaves the house with an umbrella to combat the rain pouring from the sky in a great glut of wind and water, filling the world with grey and the gutters with great rivers. Men and women dart from under eaves to their cars, running to escape the omnipresent wet, shielding themselves futilely with jackets and binders held above their heads. Lecter makes the hour and a half drive to Quantico, leaving the flooding streets of Baltimore for the petrichor smell of wet earth.

Jack Crawford meets him personally to escort him in, face like thunder, and Lecter matches him with his own mournful expression.

“Number eight. It's the damnedest thing. You know, those lucky bastards at the Los Angeles Field office have been looking for their guy for half the time we have, and what does he do? He lets his latest go! Turns himself in; says he's real sorry!” Crawford sighs and lowers himself into his chair. “Now if only we could get that kind of crazy a little farther east.”

“Lima syndrome. The lesser known sister of Stockholm syndrome. The abductor or abuser develops a sympathy for their victim, sees them not as a tool or an object, but as a being of equal worth. Unusual, but not entirely unexpected.”

Crawford laughs bitterly. “Not our guy, though. Nope. When our unsub has a crisis of conscience after taking yet another girl, he doesn't let her go, no. He takes her, kills her, and then he tucks her corpse back into bed! Puts her back – if the parents' house is where he took her from – puts her back right where he found her. Why would he risk it? Why not do to her whatever he did to the others? God knows we haven't found them, why change now? What kind of psychopath does this!”

Lecter helps himself to the case file, spreading the documents and photographs across the desk before him and sorting through to the newest information, the crime scene photos and preliminary autopsy of the eighth victim, Elise Nichols, reported missing, quickly flagged for her resemblance to prior victims, then found, all within the course of a few days. She look peaceful, sleeping the sleep of the unwaking. Long dark hair stark against her white pillow, against her white comforter, against her pallid, bloodless skin. The unknowing ingénue. Ever young, ever the same. Fleeting innocence forever preserved in death. Elise Nichols is of course much older than the usual girls used in such symbolism, but that too has its own meaning. Whether the abductor knows all that he communicates is unclear. Lecter flips to the next, a photograph of a red-stained nightgown. “Have your analysts determined the cause of these punctures?”

"Antlers. Post-mortem.”

Lecter raises an eyebrow, then continues reading the autopsy. Cause of death: manual strangulation. Very quick, relatively painless, if the killer is confident and firm. Consequently, there are no defensive wounds. No signs of sexual assault. Completely unsurprising, given the state of the crime-scene. He is not that kind of monster. Far from it. The punctures are not the only post-mortem marks sustained. He opened her, similar to how a medical examiner or a butcher would, and removed her liver... And then he put it back.

Lecter inhales sharply – not from shock, but rather from intrigue.

“Any ideas, Doctor Lecter?” Crawford asks, and it is the offering of an opportunity, an opportunity to coils his scales about the very heart of the men and women who wish to hunt him by sacrifice of another modern-day monster. It is a risk, even to bring this to their attention, to be the one who connected the dark red dots, but if he makes himself useful to these blind hounds, if he fashions himself into, not a tool, but Jack Crawford's equal in the hunt, then he would rest beyond all suspicion, beyond all reproach.

Lecter sighs, then speaks. “I do not know, but... perhaps.”

Crawford's attention is on him like the bead of a sniper. “Perhaps is a lot better than what we've been working with, Doctor.”

Lecter chews his lip. “Could I see the young woman?”

“You want to see the body? Is that necessary? You can, but it's been some time since you saw a body on a table.”

“Thank you, Agent Crawford, but I feel that I must. I would like to be certain before I say anything.”

Crawford nods and leads him to the small, sleek morgue, where he introduces Lecter to his senior forensic team. The young woman lies on the elevated autopsy table in the middle of the room, the grotesque centrepiece of a morbid feast. Lecter covers his mouth and breathes heavily through his nose, the picture of a mild neurotic regaining their control, but in truth he scents the air, scents the masculine notes of Crawford's cologne, the ever-present burn of cheap coffee, the faint sweat of the pathologist, a Brian Zeller, and that key smell of any morgue, ammonia and death. However, that is but the room. The girl herself smells very little, faint terror, but she is cold and has yet to have time to truly rot. Nevertheless, he isolates the smell, the evidence of what he had suspected from the moment he read the report. He gives her a cursory examination with his eyes, long enough to hide his true methods.

Lecter directs his attention to Zeller. “Did you find what was wrong with the liver?” He asks deferentially.

“You mean why her killer put it back? Not yet. We're running some tests, but...”

“Did you notice any jaundice, a yellowing of the skin or the sclera?”

“Yes, actually. Why-" Zeller stops. "You think she had liver cancer.”

“I think it very likely.”

Katz, the fiber analyst, looks thoughtful. “But why would that stop him? Why would that make him put it back?”

“Because it would ruin the meat, and because, dear friends, I fear your kidnapper is not just a killer.” Lecter gives the girl on the table a look of artful sympathy as a thrill goes up his spine. “He's a cannibal.”

Chapter End Notes

While most of the investigators look from a societal/law enforcement perspective and Graham looks from the emotional perspective of the given killer, I suspect Lecter would have the perspective of an painter critiquing a fellow artist's work. He therefore will not have the same insights as Graham had into the killer's motivation, but that does not mean that his insights are necessarily unimportant. After all, he did guide Graham on nearly all of the cases. His interpretation here uses literary-cultural tropes, much like qualitative psychological tests lean towards.

Zeller is stated to be in charge of discovering cause of death. I have interpreted that as "Pathologist."

...You are having way too much fun, Doctor Lecter.

Chapter 17

Lecter stays up with him for a few hours, talking mostly. Nothing that could properly be called a conversation, just Lecter going on about a street he had once seen in France, the smell of tears, and the best way to prepare fresh gnocchi. His voice is low and soothing, exaggerating and over-enunciating consonants, the only sign of his tiredness.

Graham shakes under the weight of his emotions, at once immense and indefinable. His breath catches again and again as he fights to reign himself in. Lecter makes no comment. His hand rests on Graham's back, rubbing gentle circles into the column of his spine. Graham is too weak, too drained to protest, even to feel ashamed of the way he leans into Lecter's hand, seeking perhaps to dwell in the shade of a memory of a mother's comfort. He isn't certain whether it's his memory or that of one the million minds jockeying for space in his over-full cerebrum, but if anyone had ever touched him this way, it had probably been her, gone long before her shape could be more than suspended dust in the labyrinthine recesses of the almost forgotten. His father was a good man, but not a nurturing one by nature.

A traitorous thought says that it's almost poetic, almost fitting that the first person to understand him, to comfort him, should be a man with rot through his soul, and he begins to shake once more.

For a while after Lecter leaves, Graham feels nothing. An empty mirror without the light of another's emotions. The immensity of all that he ever felt bleeding out like pigment from a canvas. He stares into the darkened room, seeing nothing. In the silence, in the dark, it is as if he has simply ceased to be.

He remembers. Clear as the morning sky, clear as fresh dew. He watches the sun rise behind his eyes and feels soft grass under his palms. He hears the buzz of insects above a still pool, and across the water his house rises like the prow of a great ship. He opens his eyes, and there is nothing.

A spark of anger ignites in his breast, and he clings to it, cups his hands around it to protect the flame, to let it grow. His face crumples and his hands twist in the sheets, but he holds onto the weak, sputtering rage. This fury, he knows, comes from within. It is proof that somewhere inside, distinct and discrete from the voices that press on him from all directions, he exists.

He barricades the door.

It's petulant. It gains him nothing but a few days of seclusion on the outside, the horrible hunger already growing in the pit of his stomach and his throat rough and dry from his tears, but he need proof, needs physical evidence that he is fighting, resisting.

The furniture is heavy, solid wood for the most part, and moving it without breaking the spell weaved by the silence takes hours, though how many is beyond him. The bookcase is the hardest: he piles all of the books onto the floor before sliding it across the room, then places them back on the shelves. He pins it all in place with the big bed frame, and curls against the far wall in a nest of blankets and sips the water Lecter left on the nightstand. It helps a little.

Lecter's knock comes before Graham feels it should be morning, so he probably fell asleep. He burrows back into the blankets and waits while Lecter goes about his morning routine.

Graham waits a little while longer after hearing the front door close, flipping through Moby Dick's massive, pointless chapter on whale biology, then he gets up, picks up the heavy stag statuette, and without quite knowing what he is about to do, he slams it into the wall, which gives beneath the blow. He sets the stag down for a moment, to peel the wallpaper away from the crumpled drywall. It comes patchily, and he reaches past the broken drywall, through the insulation, and brushes his fingers against cold metal.

Lead? An expensive material, but a highly effective soundproofer. He clicks his tongue. No telling how thick it is or how far it goes, and the little stag isn't the optimal tool for breaking through, especially if he's dealing with more than one sheet of the stuff, which is likely. He pulls his arm out of the wall and fetches the statue.

He continues around the room, using the base of the statue as a rough tool to scrape away the wallpaper. Like taking the hair off a hide. He can't reach to the top of the wall, and he quickly tires from the weight of the stag, but he scratches away great swathes, leaving behind rough, discoloured white and grey. He lies down to rest after he finishes half the wall, then again when he's laid three fourths bare. His arms are tired and his head aches.

He sleeps for some time. He thinks he hears Perotin play in the direction of the dining room, but Lecter never knocks. He drinks the last of the water and sweats it out during the night.

He begins anew in what he thinks is the morning. He isn't hungry anymore, but his arms and back complain and the corners of the statue cut into his hands, leaving orange-red streaks of blood. He sees things – out of the corner of his eye – movement. Hears noises, too. He knows it's not real, just the frantic gropings of an understimulated brain – too quiet, too dark – but he's afraid, afraid of what he might see if he turns on the light.

He finishes the second wall and then collapses, a fierce cramp in the muscle of his thigh bringing him to the floor. He has a dream – he thinks it's a dream – of being paralysed, unable to move as a ruby-eyed snake unhinges it's jaw and pulls him in by his feet. He feels it swallowing, digesting around him. He wakes up crying and forces himself to stop.

Humans, strangely enough, are quite well-equipped to handle nutritional deprivation. They retain high levels of cognition and mobility weeks after the body has begun to cannibalize it's own protein for fuel.

He can't remember where he read that.

It hasn't been that long for him – it can't have been – but he's not in the best of condition with the stress and the added exertion. He can't control his emotions, and his nightmares have taken on a hellish quality.

“I don't suppose I can ask you to stop without encouraging you further.”

Graham stares stupidly at the stag in his hands before turning towards the faint light of the doorway.

Lecter's disembodied voice continues. “You must be feeling very tired. I've no wish for you to endure this kind of suffering, Will. It can and will end once you allow it to do so.”

Graham starts on the third wall.

Lecter says nothing more.

Eventually, he sits in the middle of the room, looking at the bared walls. There remain patches of paper clinging to the wall, little bits of Lecter showing through the destruction, but this emptiness, this nihilism, is a reflection of himself. His design. He nods to himself and laughs, an inhuman scale played upon his disused vocal cords.

Methodically, he dismantles the barricade, removes the bed, the bookcase, the dresser, placing them in reverse of their original positions. The door is strange to him now. Both old and new. Curious, he reaches for the handle with fingers stained with blood and plaster.

It turns.

Walking down the hallway has an unreal quality, the soft lighting on the polished hardwood giving the world a dreamlike glow. The walls shiver with sick anticipation. The textured wallpaper writhes in agony. He stops, caught by the strong beam of light from the dining room. He turns despite his rising dread.

The long table is set, the guests assembled, two long rows of finely-dressed skeletons, suits and ties, bleached bones and faceless grins, low gowns showing off a coquettish glimpse of empty ribcage. They are frozen, fleshless hands lying still upon the table, but the rustle and clatter of silverware and the aluminium ring of polite laughter echo about the room. The skulls of all the guests are open, empty and gaping just like the eye-sockets that follow his every step. Their brains sit on the plates before them, tastefully garnished and beautifully presented.

At the head of the table, towering over all with his elegant antlers and his elegant airs, presides Hannibal Lecter, his eyes bright and empty, red like hunger, but the lower half of his face, his mouth and nose, rotted away, baring the rictal grimace of the skull beneath. Without looking up, without speaking, Lecter motions for Graham to come to him, draws him closer with intangible strings that wrap about his fingertips, leading to Graham's wrists and ankles.

Graham sits beside him, as the flies descend on the guests in a black cloud. They're eating him too, laying their eggs in his skin to feast on his bones, but he is transfixed. Lecter's dead eyes lift from the throbbing heart on which he dines to meet Graham's, and Graham is overwhelmed by a strange affection. He draws two fingers along Lecter's exposed jaw and presses a kiss against his rotten cheek.

Chapter 18

The house seems too big. Empty.

It is not unlike if one's heart simply stopped beating one day, like that steady rhythm simply ceased while life itself continued on. It is the absence of a noise which, if not for it's disappearance, would never have been heard.

Life carries on, much as it always has, without the now accustomed routine of conversation – *arguments* – over breakfast and dinner, without the strange mix of certainty and excitement that has changed the meaning of waking in the morning and returning to his lair at night.

It is disquieting.

His patients come to him, much as they always have, with their maladies and miseries, seeking comfort, seeking guidance, seeking a willing ear in which to brag, in which to mope. Mrs. Stoklosa suspects her husband of having an affair; Mrs. Pearson has begun one of her own. Mr. Gerald Smith has relapsed in his agoraphobia due to the stress of his new online shipping business; Mr. Walter Smith has recently celebrated five years sober (by his own count, four years and a few months by Lecter's, but Mr. Smith's selective memory is by all accounts no more than an unobtrusive and healthy defence mechanism.) Francis Froidevaux has apparently made a new friend, conversation over whom Lecter encourages in place of Froidevaux's clumsy attempts at camaraderie. A small section of the family of Madeline Schwartz is no longer speaking to her on the grounds of an ill-advised joke she told at an uncle's funeral; she is at once embarrassed, apologetic, and guiltily pleased, as, while the offence caused by the jest was accidental, she has never particularly cared for that side of the family and cutting all communication with them suits her right to the ground.

He performs the duties of everyday existence: trips to the grocer's, calls to acquaintances and to his uncle, edits to his most recent articles.

It's all so tedious, so banal, and he has never taken well to boredom. He has great stores of dear memories and fascinating new ideas to explore in duller moments, but the acquisition of the novel and the unique is ever a temptation into impetuousness. Like any hunger, it must be fed so that it does not make a beast of its master.

Still, he finds ways keep himself entertained.

The first night of Graham's self-isolation, after having his fun with the FBI, he spends in the basement with an old friend. Well, an old acquaintance – it wouldn't do to exaggerate the relationship. He plays *Viderunt Omnes* and a few of Bach's variations upstairs. It wouldn't do to disturb Graham; he gets so little sleep as it is. The second night he spends quietly reading. On the third he arrives home late after an evening at the Baltimore Opera to the sounds of thumps and scrapes. He sits with the back of his head against the door, still in full black tie, a glass of Bordelais in hand, and cajoles Graham to stop. Graham is quiet for a while, then resumes. A few hours later, he quiets again. Lecter listens to him breathe, rough and ragged.

It is in the morning that the tell-tale scrape of heavy furniture rouses him from sleep. He stands and curses the stiff muscles of his back. He takes his empty glass to the kitchen then retires to his room to change, disgusted with the wrinkle to his jacket and slacks. When he returns to the hall, he finds himself distracted by the sound of silence.

Lecter unlocks the door, and this time, it swings open.

A weak sunbeam cuts through the darkness and lights upon the strange figure of Graham, standing stock still in the clothes he wore the night of their fight, pale and raccoon-eyed, hair wild, and staring vacantly at the doorway. He reacts not at all to the intrusion, neither that of Lecter nor that of the sun.

Lecter steps closer and waves a hand before Graham's face, first slowly, then with speed. His eyes, lids at half-mast, pupils huge and dark, remain trained on some point far in the distance.

“Will?” He catalogues Graham's physical state, lifting his shirt and noting that the bruising is as can be expected, dark but healing. The room itself is a mess: walls bare, scraps of paper littering the floor, and over-lapping footprints in drywall dust. Lecter attempts to guide Graham towards the door, but Graham shies away from him, murmuring nonsense sounds, like one reluctantly woken from a deep sleep.

“Stop,” Lecter soothes. “Shh...” He grabs Graham's wrist. Graham stares with his big, empty eyes, and pulls clumsily at Lecter's grip with his other hand. Curious, Lecter lets go, and Graham curls his fingers around Lecter's palm, holding his hand like a young child.

Lecter carefully watches Graham, who stares through him in return. It is perhaps the longest he has held eye-contact in their acquaintanceship, but there is no true recognition. Lecter smiles and leads Graham down the hall to the kitchen. Graham follows with an unsteady somnambulist's gait.

After prying Graham's fingers from his hand, Lecter collects a tall glass from the cupboard and fill it with milk. He places it on the island, not trusting Graham to hold it. Graham stares at it, glassy-eyed and uncomprehending, blinking heavily and breathing in slow, steady pulls.

“That is for you.” Lecter rinses his own glass and retrieves a few plastic bottles. He places a handful of capsules at Graham's elbow. “Four days is not so long a time to do without food, but one must be cautious with such things. They do us more harm than we realize.”

Graham nods dully and sips the milk.

Lecter prepares breakfast – for one, it is best to reintroduce more complex foods slowly – he collects two eggs from the refrigerator and places a vine of tomatoes on the stove at low heat. “My sister sleepwalked. It's an affliction more common in children. In adults it is comparatively more likely to indicate a psychological disorder or difficulty with aggression. Do you become angry, Will? You keep your emotions tightly leashed, don't you? You hold them so close... are you afraid of what you might do in a moment of passion? What it must be like to feel so much... They say you are an empath – and an eidetiker, unsurprising given the nature of the notes in your old consultation files, very detailed, very accurate – how much, do

you think, of that anger is your own? How much of the fear? For some, those emotions are one and the same."

Graham slurps quietly.

Lecter arranges the plate to his pleasing and sits across from Graham. "I worried terribly about her, that she might hurt herself or leave the house in the night. I was a jealous child, you see, ever concerned with keeping what was mine." Graham's face crumples in perplexity. His scruffy new beard has little drops of milk in it. "Perhaps things have not changed as much as I had thought."

Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

This first thing that Graham notices is the smell of scrambled eggs and sparingly applied cologne, a mix of citrus, lavender, and what he instinctively knows to be Hannibal Lecter. His cheek presses against the soft warmth of a shoulder clothed in a high thread-count dress-shirt. He opens his eyes to the blurred colours of the den. It is a moment of intense disorientation, an odd skip in time and space. He does not remember how or when he came to be sitting in his usual place on the couch as Lecter coolly flips through a loose, unmarked folder. He reaches for the memory and finds nothing, like missing a step at the bottom of the stairs. His fingers clench, sinking into the fabric of the cushion and the meat of Lecter's thigh.

“Ah, you're awake. Good.” Lecter scratches lightly behind Graham's ear then rests his hand at the nape of Graham's neck. “Very good. You've had a hard few days. I will admit to some concern over your earlier condition.”

“Yeah, you're all heart.” The characteristic *thump-thump* of a heartbeat in his mouth. He inhales deeply to push down the nausea. Lecter passes a pen back and forth a few times in front of Graham's eyes, then smiles. It's a quiet, polite smile, barely anything at all, but Graham can feel Lecter's pleasure buzzing in his head, purring like a fat tomcat. Lecter's happiness, his anger, his excitement, all of his emotions have this odd quality to them. They're muted, like echos underwater, but they're also strange, like the fish you get at the bottom of the ocean. Recognizable, with fins and gills and little fishy eyes, but alien, with transparent skin and poisonous spines and great bioluminescent bellies. Lecter's happiness is a grinning viperfish to the average man's wide-mouth bass.

“I have a favour to ask you. I was curious as to whether I might have your assistance in a small matter.” Lecter offers the folder to Graham, who take it and opens it. The first picture fills his veins with ice. “*What is this?*” Graham hisses and closes the folder.

“I stumbled upon a interesting case through dearest Alana, and it has become a matter of some curiosity. It occurred to me that you might care to occupy yourself with something with a little more practical application, something closer to your own field than those dusty old books. You may, of course, decline.” Lecter extends a hand, palm-up, but Graham cannot find the coordination to hand the folder back, nor the strength to stop his own hands from shaking. Lecter continues. “He'll take a new one soon; we both know that. It would only be right to stop him.”

Graham stares at the floor and wishes for the thin barrier his glasses provide. “You don't care about that. You don't give a shit.”

“But you do.” Lecter reaches into his lap and opens the folder once more. “Elise Nichols. Eighth of eight. So far. You don't have to avenge her. You don't have to find justice for this girl or any of her unfortunate sisters. You don't have save the next girl. But you want to, you

are obligated, aren't you? By your empathy, by your morals. You need no external influence to feel a responsibility to their ghosts.”

Graham closes his eyes against the images – *manual strangulation, fast, confident. She barely had time to be afraid. Compassion, need, sorrow, and, at the very heart of it all, love, love, love* – he gasps and Lecter leans in, eyes digging into him like a scalpel. It's all too much.

“However, I did say that it was a favour from you to me. I do not ask without offering repayment. You may name your price.” Lecter's hand at Graham's neck soothes, petting gently. The slight ridges of his palm catch on Graham's skin, and Graham feels the cool scales of a serpent.

“What do you get out of this? Don't say nothing. Don't lie to me.”

“Name your price.”

Graham's voice is hushed and desperate. “Let me go.”

“No, no, no. You have the opportunity to ask a great many favours and privileges. Do not squander the chance in asking what will never be given.”

“What else could I want? Let. Me. Go.”

“Try again.”

“Please...” Graham wets his lips. There's a small scratch just under Lecter's hairline. “Please don't lock me up in there all damn day anymore. I can't stand it. Please.”

Lecter tilts his head. “I'll consider it. Is there anything else?”

“Could you play some music? While you're out. It doesn't matter what it is.”

Lecter smiles indulgently. “That seems acceptable. Do we have an agreement, then?”

Graham smiles back, far more sadly. “What kind of agreement could we have? You can take all this away and still keep me to my end of the deal. It doesn't mean anything, Doctor Lecter. Not a thing.”

“Those are your options, Will. Either you agree and you risk that I may not be worth my word, that any privilege gained may be just as easily lost, or you may decline and remain in situ. Status quo.”

“Then I guess I agree.”

“I'm glad to hear it. Now, tell me what you see.”

Chapter End Notes

Will Graham, here to save the day with weird fish metaphors!

Haha, five days between one chapter and the next, then two in twelve hours.
...Even *I* don't understand my update schedule, okay?

Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

In the darkness of his mind, a silver pendulum swings.

In the darkness of a young woman's room, blossoms of blood fades and recedes, wounds knit and mend, leaving white lace and unmarred skin, little red flowers sinking beneath the snow.

She sleeps. Awake, she is much like any woman her age: she has hobbies, she has interests, she has strengths and flaws. Awake, there a thousand little things that differentiate her from other pretty, intelligent, all-American girls, but she is asleep, and her stillness allows him to project. Asleep, she becomes what he needs.

It is a moment of veneration, a reverent awe, like happening across a young deer grazing in a lush meadow, verdant and untouched by civilization.

Her death will be quick.

There's something... wrong. At first he thinks it is the interference of a thousand foreign feet and a thousand gloved hands, picking clinically through the life and death of Elise Nichols, layering their placid, disinterested intentions over the dance between killer and child, alongside the distressed fumblings of panicked, grief-stricken parents. Then he thinks that perhaps it is Nichols herself who confuses him; alive, she was strong – but sweet, responsible. She was athletic, talented, ambitious, on the verge of becoming the woman she would be, and then she was nothing. He even entertains that it is Lecter, watching him, measuring him, pinning him with eyes and touches and words like an insect to cork-board, all to suit his obscene curiosity. There is no room to respect the banal dead in the empty cavern of Lecter's soul, no time to morn the ignoble deaths of beasts. Not when he has such a bright and broken new toy.

It takes a moment to re-find the familiar grooves of the murderer's thoughts – he's an unusual one, this killer – and it is then that he realizes: the kidnapping was an act of anxious desire, but this, returning that which he has taken, this is an act of sorrow.

Glossy photos slide beneath his fingers. A strong hand cups the base of his skull. The harsh pant of his own breath deafens him. His eyes sting with an emotion he cannot define. Graham feels Lecter's eyes but refuses to meet them. “What do you want to know?”

“Anything. Everything.”

“Could you narrow that down a little?”

“Why.”

“You already know why.”

“Desire comes in many shades. Tell me his.”

“I- He loves them. All of them. One of them. He loves her – so much, so much – and he can't let her go. She's leaving him.”

“How?”

Graham would ask his meaning – how does he love her, how is she leaving him – but Lecter watches him, pets him like a dog, holding the stem of a delicate wine glass in his other hand, and smiles like spider in his web. Curious he may be, but the object of his curiosity... Graham sneers unconsciously. “It isn't sexual – or at least he tells himself it isn't. He would never- it would be wrong, disrespectful to look at her like that. She isn't really leaving, not in any physical sense, but from the age of the victims... she's becoming a woman, culturally speaking. I-” His throat closes painfully, and he pushes through it to speak. “She's his, but she won't always be his – not with their relationship: it can't remain static like that. He wants her to stay, to be with him. She's special.”

“Don't correct yourself.” Lecter pets him, draws a hand along his spine. “You do not simply look through these men's eyes like a carnival mask, do you? No, you take on their perspectives: their thoughts, their feelings, their motivations. The result may be disturbing to some, but there is no shame in what you do. Certainly do not censor yourself on my account.” Lecter smiles sardonically. “You shall not offend me.”

Graham snorts. “You of all people.”

“Yes, me.”

They watch each other in the echo of those words. Graham warily, Lecter with a Cheshire smile. Graham eyes flicker upwards briefly to find Lecter's pupils swallowing the line of his iris, engorged and dark. He turns away. There is something waiting there, in the darkness of Lecter's eyes, waiting to consume him, to devour all that he is. It lies deeper still than what horror of Lecter's nature he has already glimpsed, like the black depths of ocean that lie beyond the continental shelf, and he does not wish to see.

“Why did he bring her back?”

“You know that too.”

“I want your perspective.”

Graham flips through to the Nichol's autopsy reports and thumbs the rough edges of the stock paper. “It's an apology.”

At this, Lecter pauses and tilts his head. An expression of surprise, genuine in feeling but artful and practised in production. The motion of one well versed in hiding and manufacturing emotion on command. Lecter wishes to be honest, to present his emotions as they are. It sits oddly with Graham, like miscounting the number of steps of a stairwell in the dark or biting into a bitter fruit expecting sweetness. For all that he should take advantage of Lecter's strange mood, this odd good humour and generosity, he finds himself uncertain,

wary. He senses a trap, or perhaps, he senses that Lecter draws him but another inch deeper into the quicksand, another step further into the mire of Lecter's mind.

“He couldn't do what he did to the other girls – he couldn't honour her, show his love for her, and he needs to, because she's special.” His heart clenches painfully in his chest, and tears drip down his cheeks to fall on the beige card of the manila folder. “He can't let her go, but he can't make her stay, and that's why- that's why he's taking them- just to keep a little bit of her inside. She's so special.”

“Why is she special, Will?”

“Because she's my daughter.”

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the delay, I had a debate tournament and a funeral, at which I did quite well and cried like a bitch respectively, to detract me from my obligations here. All shall now continue as per usual.

Chapter 21

A hot lunch is at once luxury and a trial these days. If he is honest, they were always a luxury, in his childhood due to school hours, his father's patchwork culinary skills, and a shoe-string budget, in later days due to work, poor appetite, and lack of motivation, but now he spends most days locked away with perhaps a small Tupperware container that might be actual Tupperware if not something more high-end rather than a cheap knock-off. For all that he is a captive, he is not an ill-fed one, the last few days aside. Lecter's pride wouldn't allow it. He used to spend lunch planning lessons at his desk, scribbling between bites, or munching on simple fare as the dogs did the same. Now he generally spends lunch staring at the textures and shapes in the ceiling, amusing himself with the associations of his over-active imagination and picking at whatever sandwich or snack Lecter has left him, knowing that, no matter his preference, failing to eat is no true option and will earn nothing but Lecter's displeasure.

The exceptions, of course, are Lecter's days off.

Lecter retains his cheerful mood throughout the length of what Graham assumes is morning. (The kitchen window faces east, and he clings to that small thing, that little piece of geographical and temporal context. It is a mantra of sanity: He is Will Graham. It is mid-day. He is facing east.) They pore over the files together, each providing insight, though Lecter more guiding Graham than anything else. Outright statements of fact spoil the mystery, spoil the game. After all, the safety of these girls has never been Lecter's aim, even if the truth of their deaths is a matter of mild curiosity.

After a busy morning, Lecter guides him into the kitchen, where he seats himself to watch as Lecter wraps himself in a tidy apron and spreads his tools across the counter. There is a strangeness to watching this act, despite its objective familiarity, after having finally shown Lecter a glimpse of his own methods. It reminds him of how much of Lecter he has yet to see. It reminds him too of how much Lecter had enjoyed the performance.

“It's obscene, you know.” Graham tells the counter-top beneath his hands. “Being so cheerful about someone's death. Disrespectful.”

Lecter does not turn, preferring to keep his attention on the vegetables he is washing in the sink. “Would you like me to stop?”

“No.” Graham sighs. “Because you wouldn't stop, would you? You'd just stop letting me see it.”

“And you would prefer my honesty.”

“Most people don't like being lied to.”

“As you say.” Lecter chops the eggplant with elegant efficiency. He is not simply skilled with the knife, but comfortable, treating the blade as an extension of himself. “But that preference only extends so far. Even those who dislike outright lies will favour, expect perhaps, to

remain unaware of unpleasant truths, to remain uninformed of inconvenient and unromantic details. However, they, unlike you, have the luxury of ignorance. You see what lies beneath, the truth that lurks within the lie. With your highly empathic nature, I imagine that few can truly hide from you." Lecter pauses. "Unless, of course, you choose to ignore what you see."

Graham says nothing, refusing to continue this line of conversation.

"You have little choice in what pieces of others find their way into your mind. How does that make you feel?"

"Really, Doctor? 'How does that make me feel?' You really are a psychiatrist. Next you're going to ask me about my mother."

"Do not dismiss the importance of parents in the psychology of the individual. Childhood environment has great weight in forming a person. It's often has its greatest effects well into adulthood. You could tell me about them, if you like."

"Good to hear my kidnapper cares about my mental health. Really, you're all heart. You'll know my parents divorced?"

Lecter nods and starts on the onion. "You were very young. Afterwards you stayed in the custody of your father. Tell me, did either of them teach you to cook?"

"My father, a bit. Fish and such."

Lecter turns then and beckons him with one hand. Graham stands uncertainly and walks with apprehension. He has no love for Lecter and his moods, but regardless that he cannot trust what Lecter will do, Lecter will not harm him irreparably, will not kill him now, in the middle of a grand game.

"Come." Lecter slides his fingers around Graham's wrist and guides him to the counter. Lecter slides in behind him, pressing against his back, bracketing him like a particularly forward parenthesis, and places the knife in his hand. Lecter leans in and whispers in his ear. "Cut."

Graham, shaking, begins to cut the zucchini, but Lecter stops him after a few slices. "Here, do not lift the blade from the board with every cut. Rather, keep the point down and let the weight of the knife do the work, like so. Careful, it will go much faster."

Graham begins anew, intensely aware of Lecter's hand on his wrist and breath against his neck.

"Good, good... You're afraid, aren't you?"

He can barely think for the drum of his heart. "Yes."

Lecter hums and rests his chin on Graham's shoulder. "In this way, you are much like a wild rabbit. Pet rabbits are lazy, indolent creatures. Domestication has stripped them of any sense of fear, any understanding of predators and danger. Even when tamed, fear is the wild buck's constant companion. They do not forget predators for what they are. They scream, you know,

but only in the moment of mortal terror, only when they are about to die. Do you ever tire of playing the part of prey? Is that what compels you to hunt those who prey on man?"

Stay out of my head. "Are you going to find him?" Him, not me. The distinction comes easier now, with fear and adrenalin filling his brain in the place of blood-soaked gowns and anxious hunger.

"Do you want me to stop him? To save all the brown-haired girls?"

"Someone has to."

"No one has to, it is just that someone should." Lecter's fingers follow the pulse in Graham's wrist. "Still, it does well to follow through with what one has begun."

Graham's muscles, taut with stress and trepidation, relax, and it is in that moment of vulnerability that Lecter pins his hand to the cutting board and sinks sharp teeth deep into his shoulder.

His world is red, all-consuming pain, but he does not scream.

His breath comes loud and shuddering, in great open-mouthed gasps, as Lecter releases the flesh he holds in his incisors. Lecter lays a sticky kiss against his neck, and he realizes that he is bleeding. He sees, then. Sees a young woman gutted like an animal, sees a liver apologetically reinserted into a cold corpse. He sees strong hands that wield a knife like an extension of the body. He sees two rows of skeletons, dining on their own brains. He sees a hundred fancy little dishes on a hundred fancy little plates and feels nauseous. Lecter pulls his plaid collar back to lap at the sluggish flow from the bite, and he feels the echo of an insatiable *hunger.*

"What- what have you been feeding me?" His hand is pale and bloodless where it is pinned, Lecter's fingers like a manacle, chaining him to the sick realization. "Lecter, what have you been feeding me?"

Against his shoulder, Lecter smiles.

Chapter 22

Graham twists in his arms, like a dog contorted by tetanus, betrayed by its own muscles, twisting and spasmodic, locking in grotesque parody of rigor mortis, while the living, conscious creature suffers the unfathomable, tearing agony, betrayed by its very body. Lecter holds him close and breathes deep, of fear and lingering sweat, of exertion and fresh blood as Graham struggles and thrashes; upon scenting the bitter smell of gastric acid, Lecter releases him, and Graham rushes to the sink, where he gags, spine arching, abdomen clenching with every heave. Lecter watches, waiting. Graham's stomach is void but for acid, and every loud retch brings only full-body spasms along with a thin trail of saliva that clings to Graham's lip. He is shaky and pale as he spits into the drain, clinging weakly the counter until his legs give way beneath him.

Lecter catches Graham and lowers him to the floor. Graham's eyes move, rapidly, back and forth below their lids, tracking motion only he can see in a form of waking dream. His eyes open, and he focuses on Lecter's face, gaze slipping to somewhere above his head, then dropping back to his eyes. Graham sees him with blown pupils and wide, white eyes. Lecter pushes Graham's hair back from the cold-sweat beading on Graham's pale fore-head and tilts his chin upward for a better look, access to Graham's wild, fearful eyes.

“D-don't touch me.” Graham's fingers twitch uselessly, the pale shadow of an intention, perhaps to strike Lecter, perhaps to push him away, hindered by the screaming of his own mind. Lecter remains as he is, crouching in his kitchen, ignoring a meal half-finished for the sake of the trembling creature curled against the low cupboards. “S-stop.”

Lecter leans in closer. “What are you feeling, Will?” Graham's eyes flicker and glitter, catching the light in a strange dance. “What do you see?”

“White sk-” Graham trails off in a sputtering hiss. “A white skeleton stands above me, Death come for me, not for my life, but all that I am. His crown is of antlers and fine white feathers.” His voice is halting and low. “I have taken from his table and now must remain his companion in hell for all my days.” Graham shudders, shivers, fingers curling with warped and inexpressible emotion. “I can't feel my hands. I can't breathe.”

“You appear to be suffering a panic attack.” Lecter dispassionately presses two fingers to the rabbit pulse in Graham's neck. “Shh...” Lecter murmurs. “This will all pass. You're not alone, dear Will, and control with soon return.”

Graham's shudders take on a different quality now, and Lecter tilts his head. Laughter. Silent, hysterical laughter shakes Graham, twists his face, and bares his teeth in rictus despair. “So, who's for dinner?”

“His name was George, I believe.”

“You *believe?*”

Lecter sighs. “A mr. George J. Davis, 54, accountant. Fond of chew-tobacco.”

“And spitting.”

“And spitting,” Lecter agrees.

Graham smiles. “I hope he gives you gout.”

Lecter sits beside Graham, so that they are shoulder to shoulder on the floor of the sunlit kitchen. “I don't suppose I can convince to join me for lunch?”

“Fuck off.”

“You're being terribly rude, Will.” Lecter brushes one hand against Graham's windpipe, his prominent Adam's apple. Graham giggles, and Lecter feels the vibration through the palm of his hand. “But I suppose I can forgive it. You've had quite a shock. Though, I wonder if you truly did not know, with all that you see, with all that you remember. Was the only way you could sit at my table to allow yourself the excuse of ignorance? That was very selfish of you, William, and I do not care to be ignored.”

A lost, out-of-place expression rises on Graham's face, out of the misery, the fear, the morbid, spiteful humour. Lecter's words wound him, more than angry, Graham is hurt, taken aback by Lecter's accusations, spurring his own irrational guilt. Though he likely does not recognize it himself, the expression on Graham's face is that of betrayal.

“What is this? Do you think this is funny? Feeding people to people on fancy little dishes, and I bet they all applaud you. You let them think themselves civilized, refined to join your table, while you watch them devour each other like the animals they are. You must think you're just so clever.”

“I think only, dear Will, that you could be so much more than you are.”

“And what am I?”

“Terrified. Of what you are, of what you could be. Of the very insights, the very mind that makes you special, different.” Lecter pushes away the damp hair that has fallen once more into Graham's eyes and considers a haircut. “You are very special indeed, Will, and I do not say that lightly.”

“I'm not like you.” Says Graham, and he understands, he knows just Lecter's meaning. Lecter wets his lips and scents again the now-coagulating blood staining Graham's plaid shirt. He does so quite openly, leaning in and taking a deep drag of Graham's acrid, fear-soaked odour, unblemished by artificial scents or anything other than those of Lecter's own space.

“You are just like me.”

“You're not better than them.”

Lecter tilts his head and raises an eyebrow.

“Better than your garden-variety serial killer perhaps, pathetic, terrified, twisted little people with just enough self-control to keep from getting caught, at least for a little while, I'll grant

you're better than them, but those people you kill? The rude, spiteful people that you kill and the stupid, blind people that you feed them to? You're no better than them. Killing for petty slights? Smiling outside while inside you despise? You think wearing a better veneer over the rot makes you superior? You're no better."

Lecter purses his lips, and Graham cackles and shudders. Lecter is overcome with a surge of cold anger, which is quickly overtaken by the same curious affection that plagues him whenever Graham insults and belittles him. Lecter stands, stifling the urge to reach for Graham. "I'll leave you here for now, but know that, after this, I expect you to join me for meals." He turns back his preparations, finishing the meal with no less attention than it deserves.

Lecter dines alone, sweet Vivaldi overlaying Graham's sharp sobs as he comes down from a state of disassociation, and contemplates the painting that adorns the wall behind Graham's usual seat, that of Boucher's *Leda and the Swan*.

Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

> Second chapter posted today. First was posted in the depth of the night, for I do not sleep, merely wait.

Bedelia Du Maurier greets him at the door, all cold, lithe elegance, though she saves a little warmth for him. “Doctor Lecter.”

Lecter smiles. “Bedelia.”

“Hannibal. It's been a while since our last meeting; do come in.” She leads him into the kitchen, where she pours them both a glass of wine, Du Maurier's collection is one primarily composed of whites and rosés in contrast to Lecter's strong preference for reds, and they talk, casually, reacquainting themselves with each other's edges.

She watches him, with a perceptiveness that, until recent months, from anyone else would signal an unforgivable threat to his way of life and continued freedom. “What's wrong, Hannibal?”

“Nothing.” Lecter savours the warm scent of the wine. Du Maurier cocks her head curiously, disbelieving, but with no judgement for the lie. “That is to say, wrong is not the exact word I would use.”

She nods, and leads him to the sitting room where they have their sessions, a close approximation in size and layout to her former office. Du Maurier waits until they are both seated. “You don't need to say anything, Hannibal. You have your secrets, even from me, but I do ask you to consider it. This is bothering you.”

He turns the idea over cautiously. A secret never told is the only secret never to blossom into a truth. The safest way to secure oneself from the gangrenous past is to leave it there, lest the festering rot seep into the present. Still, the matter is troubling, and he shall have no other confident. Lecter makes his decision. “I met a man.”

Du Maurier rests silent, allowing him to halt or continue, to choose the pace of his revelations without her interference without pressure or censure. She always was a superlative therapist.

“He is unlike myself, entirely unlike. We have different lives, different world-views, but we understand each other. He sees me for myself.”

Du Maurier leans back, the only sign that betrays her surprise. “Hannibal... I'm glad. You don't easily let people in,” Her mouth purses ruefully, “Not even me. However, might I say

this is somewhat sudden, particularly for a man of your temperament. How long have you known him?"

"A few months only. A meeting of happenstance. We had a connection, not immediately, but for all that he is a near antithesis to myself, there is something... I suspect we have more in common than might be immediately apparent, and... he has changed the way I once thought of myself."

"He challenges you."

"He makes me question who I am, and I feel I must return the favour. Not out of obligation, you understand."

"No," She watches him carefully, "Out of love."

He stares beyond her, through the tall windows at her back. "Yes." He swallows. "I find myself concerned with his well-being, with his self-actualization. I want to help him."

"Mmm. And what do you want in return?"

"I do not know." Lecter hesitates. "But I suspect that he does." His fingers drum against the arm of the chair. "We argued, recently, at my instigation. He refused to contact me for some days afterwards. We spoke for the first time earlier today. Unkind things were said on both sides."

Du Maurier swirls the wine in her glass thoughtfully. "What caused the argument?"

"I informed him of some unpleasant truths."

"Please be honest with me, Hannibal. As honest as you can."

Lecter's upper lip curled. "I mocked him with my relationship to a woman for whom I suspected he held no small regard."

"And why did you do that? What brought you to that moment? What purpose did it serve?"

Power. Domination. Communication: not even in your mind are you beyond my reach. "I was jealous."

Du Maurier leans back. "An interesting word, jealousy. Often used as a synonym for envy, though there is a small distinction. One envies that which belongs to another. Jealousy is an emotion reserved for that which we already possess." She smiles. "But I'm sure you knew that." The expression quickly fades into a soft frown. "Regardless of the specifics of your intentions, you want to become closer to this man, you want intimacy, closeness. Do you fear that he will reject you? Is that why you felt threatened by his feelings for her?"

Lecter stands and walks to the window, even there, though, Du Maurier's voice reaches him.

"I wonder at your uncertainty, Hannibal. I wouldn't expect it of you." Her voice is low, considering. "You have many qualities, and if this man is as perceptive as you believe him to

be, he can see that too, but no relationship can exist without effort, without participation and reciprocity. Perhaps you can show him another face. You are a passionate man, Hannibal. Let him see more than your jealousy. Show that you care about him, that you're willing to work with him on this." There is the soft clink of delicate glass. "Some more wine, Hannibal?"

"Please."

Chapter 24

Lecter receives a call from Agent Crawford shortly after his appointment with Du Maurier. Lecter has, via email, made several polite enquiries into the case, made himself useful as a sounding board, kept his name fresh in Crawford's mind, so that when Crawford's primary consultant, the ever in-demand Alana Bloom, is unavailable, he will be Crawford's first call. The man himself is still in Minnesota, overseeing the deployment of a contingent of FBI and local law enforcement, locked in the brunt footwork of cataloguing and eliminating every man in the state employed by key construction companies after a fibre analyst found a small curl of metal on the gown of Elise Nichols.

A ninth girl fitting the profile has gone missing. Unsurprising, the killer would have to take another soon, but the stress is clear in Crawford's voice.

A fitting way to act on Du Maurier's advice occurs to him: to fulfil Graham's most recent request. Simple. Obvious. He shall have to do more, of course- trust is formed through patterns, not isolated events- but it is a beginning, a place from which to launch this next campaign. Graham has seen, now he must be brought to accept.

He makes a last stop on the way home, walking to the university to allow the wine to filter though his system before driving. He has a high tolerance and a taste for moderation, but the polite thing is also the responsible thing.

Madeline Schwartz open the door a few seconds beyond the strictly acceptable, fully dressed, but with face flushed and soft and hair mussed from sleep, squinting in the mid-afternoon sunlight. She stares up in the general direction of his face, and produces a low coo from the back of her throat. She tilts her head, listening to his breathing, looking at him up and down, and he says nothing, allowing her the exploration. It takes a the work of a few seconds before she recognizes him, but he can see the moment the knowledge sparks in her eyes. Flaring her nostrils and focusing suddenly on the knot of his tie, she speaks, “Hello, Doctor. It's not Tuesday.”

In another, the inability to immediately recognize a close acquaintance and weekly conversation partner would be a worrisome psychological flag, but Schwartz has prosopagnosia – face blindness – and it takes her a shade longer to identify even familiar individuals out of context given only visual cues, unable as she is to make a recognizable whole from the individual features.

“Hello Madeline, you haven't missed your appointment. Now, what does one do when a guest arrives at the door?”

“Invite them in?” She looks over her shoulder into the apartment. “That is... not a good idea. I am in no fit state to have company over. Instead, I should invite them out!” She pauses, opening mouthed, brow creased, mind working furiously. “Want to go grocery shopping?”

“Coffee would be the more conventional choice.” Lecter slips easily out of the role of last, lingering patient of Doctor Du Maurier, out of the role of earnest consultant to Agent

Crawford and the FBI, and into the role of patient teacher to Miss Madeline Schwartz, who has never so much needed a therapist as an etiquette instructor and perhaps a pet cat. Many roles, many masks in the one man play that is the public existence of Hannibal Lecter.

“Ah, but there isn't a single genteel coffee shop in walking distance – they're all retail chains or independents with more hipster cred than quality – neither a heavily market-researched, 'youth friendly' logo nor three varieties of free-trade organic soy milk do a quality latte ensure, and my guest's tastes run towards the refined.” She leans in conspiratorially. “Also, I don't like coffee.”

“To the grocer's it is, then.”

Then speak little during the walk. He asks after her well-being; she answers with a prompt and friendly 'very good, thank you,' but does not reciprocate the question, whether due to their relationship as doctor and patient or her own disinterest in the answer, he knows not. Schwartz is a profoundly curious person, a true intellectual, always exploring, ravenously devouring information and knowledge, but rarely does that curiosity intersect with the daily lives of other human beings.

He humours her silence as she peruses the vegetables, eyeing the onions suspiciously, tossing zucchini into the basket without any inspection, and hovering for several minutes over the cabbages, unconsciously pulling faces, lips moving with her thoughts, '*the real issue is the cost... not a question of yes or no... won't make you happy... more the shadow of the feeling,'* before dismissing them entirely and fluttering over to the carrots. “Am I allowed to talk to you here?” She asks suddenly.

“Is there a reason why you would not be? I approached you.”

“I suppose.” The word ends in a slow, sibilant 's.' Her concern fades into a placid half-smile, the former stiff and over-practiced, an affectation, like most of her expressions, the latter non-indicative of her mood, a negative, neutral state without meaning. “But normally my family pays you for the pleasure.”

“The line of our relationship, while necessary, need not be so strict as that. While admirable that you wish to maintain professionalism in what is a professional relationship, it is important that you don't hold me at a distance. Certainly, I would not forbid you from speaking to me outside the context of our sessions if you so desire.”

She frowns at the proposed ambiguity and wanders down the cereal isle. She picks up a brightly coloured box and waves it at him with bald-faced glee. Nothing in his expression changes, but she laughs and puts it back. “I always forget how much I hate that stuff until I eat it again-again. Too sweet, like flavoured sugar pellets.”

“Do you find the idea upsetting, Madeline? To be someone's friend and colleague, both at once?”

“You know I don't have feel-lings.” She smiles. “Or friends, for that matter.”

Lecter purses his lips. “That is not precisely true, now, is it? A blunted capacity to sense your own emotions is not the same as their absence.”

“I know.” She repeats the word, testing its bounce like that of a rubber ball. “Know-know-know.”

“It's not wrong, you understand, to use humour as a defence. Quite the contrary. It's very mature, but on occasion, one must be sincere.”

“Psycho-dynamics, really?” She smiles, a touch more naturally. “And there lies the great difference between psychiatry and other medical fields. The psychiatrist may use whatever methods he likes from Freud to Skinner so long as he does no lasting harm to his patient, and even then, only in extreme cases would his behaviour provoke review. Unfair. I should be allowed to prescribe therapeutic lobotomies for everything from headaches on up and to tell my patients that all their woes have genesis in excessive masturbation.” There is an imitation here, a touch of his own bearing and cadence. Not an alltogether unflattering impression, but she does respect him, despite her bluster. She requests recordings of each and every session, and by all appearances, she takes his advice with the utmost seriousness.

“Psycho-dynamics has come a long way since Freud. Besides, I was of the impression that you wished to specialize as a pathologist. If so, most, if not all, of your patients shall be dead.”

“And what a way to go.” She selects a small loaf of lemon bread. “Still, I am being quite awful. I hope you know that I do not mean it as a personal criticism. I've been very grateful for your support these past few years. It's the general lack of accountability that bothers me. No more than that.”

“You are not wrong. It is a question facing all who take others into their care, particularly when we take responsibility for another's emotional well-being. The line between a strong doctor-patient relationship and impropriety is at times a thin one. The distinction between comforting as a professional and comforting as a friend or lover has proven itself a difficult one to navigate for many a therapist to the detriment to many a patient.”

“I can see a lot of patients fluttering their eyelashes at you.” She puts on a high, simpering voice and does so. *“Oh Doctor Lecter.”*

“Now, now you are being awful. I am old enough to be your father. Be kind to an old man.”

She laughs. “You have the cheekbones of a serial-killer and the jawline of a movie star. I don't care, but certain women, such as *most of them,* are very, very fond of that sort of thing.”

“I bet you say that to all the boys.”

“Don't tell me there haven't been doe-eyed widows and no-so-widows.”

“I will neither confirm nor deny any such baseless allegations.”

Playing along with her jokes calms Schwartz. She trusts him implicitly, of course, allowing him to follow her well outside her visual field, only glancing to see his reactions, to reassure herself of her own behaviour, but she stims subtly, holding her arms strangely, twisting and twirling one hand by her hip. Unusual, unplanned situation with the added stressor of her own need to impress. The unhappy irony of a private, introverted person so driven by external approval.

Crawford's killer, the man that Tattle Crime is calling 'the Minnesota Shrike,' is an older man with a college-age daughter. He is patient, throughout, thoughtful. Graham's revelation about the girl has given Lecter a sharp suspicion as to how the man finds his prey: it is not so unusual to see an older man go to and from campuses in the company of a young woman. Not a soul would take note. Just a responsible *(doting)* father preparing his daughter to leave the nest.

However, that knowledge helps Lecter not a whit. He cannot trust that he would spot the killer on sight; he is, by any indication, an atypical sort of killer. To be certain, their kidnapper is no everyday psychopath. Therefore, Lecter's usual methods of hunting may very well proove ineffective. He have to flush out his prey. Or perhaps he will take his cue from Graham, play the part of fisherman, and draw the killer in with a clever lure.

They stop at the till, Schwartz's basket holding aught but three zucchini, a loaf of bread, and four kilos of raw carrot. She turns to the clerk, and her body language changes entirely. She is friendly, direct, charming, as usual, but more-so, she plays the part of sweet, wholesome normalcy to perfection. She looks to him afterwards, pushing her long brown hair out of her face. He nods, and she returns the motion with an unfeigned smile in her own bright blue eyes. She hands him one of the bags after placing the rest in her backpack, a form of reciprocation, a reflection of her own need to be needed, wanted, useful. He takes it and places a hand on her shoulder, which she doesn't protest, well at ease.

“Madeline, might I ask a favour?”

Chapter 25

He sits at the head of a fine long table, entertaining a cadre of fine faceless guests, each resplendent in suits and gowns of finest pedigree, long necks bedecked with baubles, Silbersteins, Blancpains, Mullers, and Parmigianis peering obtrusively from under pressed, high-thread cuffs. He smiles, because he is not Will Graham, and tells a joke, polite and even, each carefully chosen word a secret, encoded with lies and whispers and hidden knowledge, a language known to him alone, a lock the key to which he holds beneath his tongue, and even as it fills his mouth with sharp bitter metal, it sates his hunger for another moment longer: to be ignored is anger, but to mock the ignorant is sport.

His guests caw in approval, dull peahen who cackle to conceal their stupidity, naive chickens who think themselves hawks.

He smiles, not without irony, not without sardonicism. Life is joy. Life is pain. He eats of life, spears it on a glittering fork, lifts it, sweet and red, to his mouth, and drowns it in heady wine, so that it may renew him with its vigour.

He watches as his guests, one by one, do the same, digging into the meat before them with hands and nails and tearing jaws, unknowing of the tacky blood that coats their fingers and builds along their nail-beds, unseeing of the deep red ichor that drips down their gore-stained chins and pools around their feet. He dabs at his own chin with a woven cloth.

He is, after all, a civilized beast.

His eyelids flutter as Lecter pushes the damp cloth across his cheek. His thoughts are thick and drowsy, like cold syrup in the humid heat of the bath. He grasped futilely at the memory he knows slots somewhere between lying immobile on the kitchen floor, paralysed by his own emotions and lying naked in the bath, passively listening to Lecter as he talks about an upcoming show at the opera: the arrangement of the music, the daring reputation of the auteur's previous work, all the entitled women and self-satisfied men he'll have to fend off in order to keep his space. Lecter doesn't say it quite like that, but Graham can read through the lines. Clearly, Lecter far prefers the music to the company, though in truth he is not irritated by them... rather, he is amused, a pale and condescending emotion.

Lecter's sleeves are rolled up past the elbow, leaving his forearms bare, covered only by a dusting of fine brown hair, and it's far stranger than it should be.

The memory isn't gone, he knows, but the fog in his mind won't let him grasp it; it weighs down his head and his hands. “Don't fall asleep.”

Graham blinks lazily, lopsided and slow. “Don't tell me what to do."

The cloth moves down to his chest, leaving a trail of soft suds. “It would be dangerous for you to sleep here in your state.” Lecter eyes are impassive, but his face takes on a slight pinch, small, involuntary, suppressed and thin, much like most of his emotions. “You're hypoglycemic.”

A weak spark of irritation flutters about Graham's ribcage. “I'm not touching anything you give me.”

The tension spreads to Lecter's broad mouth then fades, and Graham sees echos, him curling beneath the thick blanket and shivering so hard his teeth clack and clatter, laboured breathing deafening as it forces itself past the constriction of his throat, Lecter's hand on his brow, Lecter pulling him to his feet.

“It has been several days since you last had a proper meal.”

Graham snorts. “Don't act like I’m the one in the wrong here. *You eat people*."

Lecter sighs, put upon, and places, of all things, a small juice-box at his elbow. He stares at it, mistrustful despite the absurdity of it. It's a strange gesture, an absurd kindness, obvious in its conciliatory nature. Lecter is irritated, but unwilling as of yet to force the issue and doubly unwilling to allow Graham to harm himself. Briefly Graham wonders... He feels strangely numb looking at the square little tetra-pack. It's not one the squashed, plain boxes his father sent with him to school sometimes. This stuff tastes like genuine off-the-tree oranges more than likely. Something dark and violent lurks behind Lecter's glittering eyes, behind the gentle smile that curves his mouth like a blade, and Graham becomes starkly aware of his nakedness, his vulnerability – there is only so far Lecter will be pushed, only so far he will sustain insults to his hospitality, and the recourse for crossing that line will be great and terrible. Graham picks up the juice-box.

The violence to Lecter's eyes never fades, but it does to an extent retreat. It's still there, lithe and sinister beneath the placid, civilized exterior, but he has lost it's attention for now. He feels a spark of stuttering, nervous relief, but it struggles to rise to the surface of his mind, strangled and finally snuffed out by the thick layer of Lecter's blunted, inhuman emotions, pooling about his limbic system, suffocating his own emotions, dulling his own reactions.

“Why did you kill him?”

"Forgive me, but you'll have to be more specific."

"Bastard." Graham comments conversationally, unwapping the flimsy plastic straw and stabbing the tetra-pack ineffectually. "The accountant, George Davis. Why did you kill him?"

Lecter stands and fetches a small bottle from the counter. "He was a disgusting, vulgar man, no more deserving of his life than an ant might be deserving of the glory of the sun."

In his mind's eye, Graham sees him, his imagination filling in the relevant details - an older man in a staid, conservative suit, yellowed fingers and yellower teeth, he drums his finger against his knee, jittery and impatient from withdrawal. Graham pushes away the sickening swell of disgust that threatens to curl his lip in a sneer. "Did he have a family?"

"What matter if he did?"

"They might disagree with your assessment as to his value."

"Perhaps, but it makes no difference. The choice is mine, because I took it. Power over life and death exists only in the hands of those who would take it. There is no question if the answer is certain, and no power if it can never be exercised. To have no choice is to be a slave. To have all choices is to be free." Here a nostalgic warmth creeps into Lecter's strange dead eyes. "We are all of us at some point between the two, though we might move closer to one or the other at different time in our lives. And of course, to have the ultimate choice, of life or death, no matter how arbitrarily one might choose, that, that is to be divine."

"Wow, you really are Satan."

"Mmm... Sit up for a moment."

Graham does so, and Lecter begins lathering his hair. The image comes to Graham suddenly, the damp weight of wet denim, the hot lick of the sun across his shoulders, the permeating stink of wet dog, and he smiles.

Lecter watches him, impassive, eyes moving, consuming and recording all, then smiles as well, big and genuine. It makes Graham feel exposed unlike anything else.

As he rinses Graham's hair, Lecter leans in and murmurs, "The world is a thing of terrible pain and unfathomable beauty. Why should we tolerate those who threaten that beauty, even for a moment? Pettiness, pedantry, vulgarity, insipidness, ignorance... They all bring such ugliness to the world. It is a better place without them."

"Beauty? There's more to life than- I get you don't mean fucking aesthetics, but people have more value than just fitting one man's sense of decorum - by all figuring, sentient life is a miracle in itself, and even if we're the only ones here to care- isn't that beautiful? Even if that life is occasionally petty and vulgar- Doesn't that mean something? It's just- by that definition, does anyone deserve to live?"

Lecter smiles and pushes the wet hair off Graham's forehead fondly, pleased, tucking it behind his ear. "No."

Lecter pauses and tilts his head oddly, staring at Graham, then says, hollow and a touch sentimental, "Perhaps."

Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Lecter does not hate people, in much the same way that most people do not hate cattle or poultry. It is a petty, childish thing to hate something so unworthy of the emotion. Hate and love are sentiments best reserved for equal creatures, lest one demean either expression. He does, indeed, dislike a great many of them, primarily as a group – the confused, ignorant cruelty of the human race as a collective is near as great as the brilliant, brute intelligence, kindness and creativity of the same – but on occasion as individuals as well: primarily those arrogant morsels of mankind who personify the very savage small-mindedness that so stains humanity as a whole.

Lecter has met more than a few shining individuals worthy of such emotion, of investment beyond that of a casual mental sneer – he could come to hate Agent Crawford, for instance. The man is, at times, crude, blunt, uncouth, bending others to his will through the force of his personality and his anger. However, the man is not a petty tyrant by any measure. He wields his nature, like a knife and like a cudgel, for a goal, never mindlessly vulgar, never purposelessly rude. He manipulates his world with rough hands, like a bricklayer or a carpenter. His colleagues, his underlings, his connections, Alana Bloom, and even Lecter himself, all of them Crawford manipulates, though he would not call it such. Though there is little art in it, there is purpose, there is design.

It's admirable, in it's own way.

From Lecter's research, as well as a short conversation with Mrs. Bella Crawford, a stately, elegant woman who matches her name in beauty and smells even now, at this early stage, of cancer and death, good Agent Crawford also is also a man of great repute at the bureau, a leader and a general, who uses every resource at his disposal in pursuit of his prey. It is well known that Crawford long ago set his eyes on the Chesapeake Ripper, that he considers himself the Ripper's great nemesis, his valiant rival.

Lecter thinks not.

Though, while it is true his hatred, even his personal dislike, are rare, the amount of patience he has for society comes and goes with the tide, waxes and wanes with the silver moon. Some days he craves company, an audience for his wit, for his attire, for his intellect, but on others he wishes for nothing more than solitude, perhaps accompanied by a glass or two of wine and a good book.

Now he stands at the centre of a revolving, churning crowd, fingers pressed gently along the stem of a delicate flute of champagne, nodding along to the deep, throaty alto of the widowed Mrs. Augusta Donaldson and the warbling mezzo-soprano of the thrice divorced and recently remarried Angela Steele née Snow, accompanied by her unmarried niece, a Jennifer Smith,

and her newest husband, a well-kempt, athletic young man, who had fallen asleep during the performance and had gone glassy-eyed and wandered off to find a waiter the moment the conversation turned to the latest fashions in architecture and had yet to return even as talk turned to recent gossip. (The daughter of the youngest brother of the director of the board had recently been arrested, after a fit of profoundly poor judgement had led her to attempt to smuggle drugs to a boyfriend in prison.) Lecter does not find it a particularly interesting story, nor did he the last three times he heard it. The young are ever prone to foolishness, regardless of to whom they are related, pedigree endowing no inoculation to idiocy, and he will pretend neither shock nor scandal that this remains the case. They pick over the tale like lions of the savanna over the skeleton of an unfortunate wildebeest, each with ill-feigned pity and more ill-hidden glee. *Her poor parents!*

He smiles and watches them, thinking, *I have killed for less than your bald schadenfreude; I have killed, butchered, and served you your peers with expertly paired wines and delicate arrangements of flowers, and you have praised me even as you devoured their flesh; as you speak, there is a babbling oracle locked in my guest room with only a sample of literature and a record-player between him and gibbering insanity.*He chuckles and warmly chides them for their gossip. “Really, have some heart. It does not do to spread the story among their fellows. These troubled times deserve our sympathy and our discretion.”

After lingering on the topic for several minutes more, the ladies return like well-fed lionesses, or perhaps a pack of fat house-cats, to a more playful hunt.

Donaldson, as always, makes the first move. “I must say, in all the time I've know you, Hannibal, you've never mentioned anyone.” She imbues the last word with significance, eyes narrowing coquettishly.

The others follow her lead without hesitation, Steele cooing, “Come now, Lecter, you must have something, a little snack maybe, for entertainments sake. Unless the reason you won't tell us is because you feel it will shock us, then let me assure you, we are all women of of the world.” She winks and lays a companionable hand on his elbow. He hisses internally, *I ate your first husband with a side of cranberries*, but it is without true bite. His good humour is not so easily damaged as that.He sometimes wonders if there is anyone similar to himself at these events – not psychopaths, there are plenty of those, of course. Positions of influence and power do attract a certain kind of individual after all – rather, if there are other murderers, other hunters and killers. Anyone else who idly imagines the deaths of 'dear friends' and 'charming acquaintances' as potential evening plans rather than simple escapism.

“Hardly, hardly. There's no one.” Lecter smiles. “Wouldn't I tell you first if there were?”

“As if!” Cackles Donaldson.

“Still,” Said Smith, low and thoughtful, the first she has spoken. “It must be very lonely.”

“Not at all. Think, what is loneliness? No more than the absence of companionship, where, might I say, I am quite blessed.” The women titter, flattered, and Lecter then excuses himself in the guise of locating an old friend and slips outside through the kitchen.

Loneliness. For many, to be alone is to be lonely, unable to withstand the world without another's voice to drown out their own thoughts, certain inner-truths too loud in the fragile tranquillity of a quiet moment, the absence of friends and lovers a void to be filled. Lecter is no stranger to being alone, nor to loneliness, he has come to find, but loneliness for him is another beast entirely: want of understanding, of mental communion, rather than want of a warm body. It is not something to correct, to endure, but rather, it is another piece of the human condition, a state from which to learn, in which to explore. The light of companionship would have no meaning without the dark of isolation, would it?

Though it is a warm night, the open air is a shock after the captured heat of hundreds of bodies. They've yet to feel the full force of fall, and winter is a long way away yet. The sky above the narrow alley is thick pitch, a black expanse devoid of stars, the lights of the heavens having bowed out before the humming glow of the city. He has the strange sense that he is not alone in the night, a inexplicable wariness which he has long learned to trust, and so he sinks into the shadows which embrace him like an old friend.

The young man – not such a young man, but they all seem young to him these days – who steps out of the dark is a tall shade, supporting on his shoulder another man who to the unfamiliar eye would seem merely unconsciously or heavily intoxicated, but to Lecter's gaze was quite, quite dead. The young man drags his less-fortunate fellow along, pausing briefly when the corpse's hat slips from its head, before continuing on. He stops, suddenly, at the mouth of the alley, glancing about, as though he too has sensed another in the dark, and Lecter chooses that moment to reveal himself, stepping forward to retrieve the hat from where it has fallen, then walking to meet his companion in the lee of an overflowing dumpster, where he places the hat tidily on the head of what appeared to be the very recently deceased Mr. Steele. “You lost this.”

The young man watches him, hesitant, uncertain, eyes dark and intense, then speaks. “Thank you. That's very kind.”

“No problem at all.”

“Nevertheless.” He shifts the corpse in his arms and sticks out a leather-clad hand, which Lecter shakes congenially.

“Think nothing of it. Now, I suppose you must be on your way.”

“Yes.” The young man nods stiffly and continues, out of the alley and down the street, Mr. Steele's limp feet dragging behind them, scuffing their shine off on the pavement.

Lecter returns inside, humming a sweet tune.

Ah, the young.

Chapter End Notes

I must have misposted the previous chapter, at least at first, as I received no comment for several hours. My first thought, "Whelp, I've finally done it. They hate me." I later regained my head and corrected the issue.
Thank you all so much for your comments and for putting up with my neurosis. You are entirely lovely.

Chapter 27

There is music.

There is music, and it is beautiful. It thrums through the floor-boards. It passes like a ghost through the inner wall. It glides softly through the air, like a feather held aloft by a warm gust of wind, the breath of a great beast in slumber. It alights on the shuddering, screaming pathways of his brain and soothes his frayed and fragile nerves.

Most times it is Lecter's usual collection. Austere classical, soaring opera, intricate baroque, and spare and disharmonious shards of modern avante-garde. Sometimes, though, sometimes it is classic rock, old country, and vibrant and twisting jazz. Sometimes it is Elvis and Queen and Bruce Springsteen and Willie Nelson and Edith Piaf and Louis Armstrong. He touches his cheeks and finds them wet the first time Cash plays. He taps his foot to Folsom Prison Blues as tears rain down. He sings along, voice strange and slurred to his own ear.

As promised, Lecter has taken to leaving music playing whenever he goes out. Graham can no longer tell when Lecter comes and goes, but he finds he does not mind, so long as the music plays, so long as his mind is not left to stretch out into the silence. Music sparks something in him: it shapes and directs his memories, takes him to days and ways long un-visited.

He's sitting in the front seat of his dad's rusted-out pick-up, bony knees poking out of his worn jeans. His dad's got one hand on the wheel and the other out the window, cheap cigarette held loosely between two fingers, and they're somewhere between Houma and Thibodaux. The air is thick and hot from the smoke and the humidity, and they're leaving, moving again – but dad's happy, smiling just a little and humming to himself, and for a little while, he smiles too, lets himself relax. It won't last, it never does, but he calms down, deep breaths like the nice lady at his old school said, and hums along to the crackling radio, along to his dad's deep buzz. His dad ruffles his hair, and the gruff, “Alright kid?” still echos in his ears.

He's filing paperwork in the old station down in New Orleans, scanner chatter just on the edge of his perception, fan on the ceiling twirling in a lazy oval, latest in a long string of partners taking a cat-nap in her chair. He remembers this. Back when he wore slacks and police blues instead of plaid and denim. Back when the victims were just people in the wrong place and the wrong time. Back when the killers were just lost souls. Back when he could stretch his arms out without pulling at the scar tissue that marbles his shoulder. His colleagues ask him out for drinks, and, politely as he's capable, he declines, goes home to his bare little apartment to stare at the walls while the little wireless chirps and sings on his nightstand. Eventually they stop asking, but he doesn't really note it when they do.

He's at the front of the class, eyes down but voice strong. They watch him, and he despises their eyes. They listen too, and so he continues. It doesn't matter what they do. It doesn't matter what they think. It matters only that they hear and they learn. He has to help, if only in this small way, has to use the piercing, crippled eye of his mind. He owes the empty faces and

broken bodies that crowd his thoughts, he owes them at least that much. At the back of the class, a phone rings, and he ignores the embarrassed student, ploughing on with his lecture. It is no concern of his.

He lies on the floor of a tiny room which has come to be his prison and watches the ceiling melt, drip like hot, sticky molasses. The floor-boards thrum and shiver beneath his palms. He feels sick, and he has to close his eyes, has to press his forehead against the cool wood of the bed-frame. He didn't imagine that, just now. That wasn't-

He breathes deeply, in and out, waiting for the earth to stop writhing beneath him, then carefully opens his eyes. Nothing. All as it should be.

He strips off his shirt, wipes the cold sweat from his body, and throws it across the room. He considers, thoughts suddenly sharp and suspicious, that this might be Lecter's doing. Lecter enjoys his distress, enjoys his pain, laps up misery like a cat at cream. He could ask. Watch Lecter's mouth curl, his eyes glisten, and know that this was his doing. Lecter never lies. Not explicitly. Not to him. It's no moral point, of course not, but rather an absurd chivalry, an amusing self-handicap. Lecter will omit, mislead, and misdirect, but he will not outright lie, not to Graham, not but in the direst of circumstances. It amuses him, perhaps, to fool the world while telling them with every movement, every moment, exactly what he is, if only they had the wherewithal to see.

But oh, where he has mislead... what he has omitted-

Graham closes his eyes tightly, grits his teeth against the sickly grip of nausea, against the thick smell of acid at the back of his throat.

He sets to performing a few push-ups, letting the exertion focus his trembling body, clear his troubled mind. It is only after two dozen that he collapses, weak-limbed, head spinning. He tries again, performing another five, and this time he is down gagging, muscles spasmodic. He lies panting for a while, regaining his composure, then, curious and not quite understanding his own actions, he places one palm firmly against the floor and uses the weight of his body to *twist.*

The pain is blindingly intense, so much so that he feels it less as pain and more as a buzzing chill emanating from his arm and reaching down to his toes, the nerves of the rest of his body shrieking in sympathetic agony. To his knowledge, he makes no sound, merely gasps, silent, and pulls each breath with a herculean effort. Like nothing else it clears his head.

He lies on his side, body curled around his injured arm, and breathes, letting the music wash over him. Vivaldi, of all things, and he is walking home, late on a bright-lit Baltimore night, blood warm and head light with the whisky he's poured over his grief. He has to prepare, has to sign all the forms and buy his ticket back to Louisiana and get a carer for the dogs, but that can all be done tomorrow. Tonight, tonight, he drinks in communion with the invisible stars, he drinks to the knowledge that he is an orphan, alone beneath the inky sky. He left the bar an hour ago, when it became too crowded for his tastes, and then some, with colourfully dressed and celebratory locals, an unnecessary and unwelcome reminder of home, and just kept walking, deciding he rather liked the fresh air. He brushes past a well-dressed stranger, giving

it no real thought... and then there is nothing, a blank section of tape until his memories flicker back into being in an elegant and regal dining room.

And there it is, a long ignored sliver of knowledge, of understanding. Graham laughs, laughs at his own ignorance, this grand joke at his expense.

He supposes he should be flattered, to have been upgraded from dinner to pet.

Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Lecter knows immediately, watches him from the doorway, immaculate as always, sharp and elegant as a knife in fine black tie, but... loose somehow. Relaxed in a small, indefinable way. Graham's used to hiding pain, concealing injury both literal and metaphorical, but Lecter's eyes track him, watch the way he sits and stands, and Lecter's nostrils flare.

Graham glares at a point just beyond Lecter's head. “What?”

Lecter steps aside, allowing him to pass without any true response.

It sets him on edge.

Graham stays on his “side” of the kitchen while Lecter fetches a glass of milk and places it before him. Lecter's movements are strange and fluid, his expression mute and closed. It's not anger, not sadness... merely a buzzing void were emotion should be. Lecter perhaps senses that he has made a misstep, made Graham uncomfortable, and smiles, raising his mask far too late.

“Do not look at me that way. It is milk, goat's, from the market.”

“So, not the adulterated blood of unborn infants?”

“Too much effort for no real benefit. There is very little difference between foetus blood and other blood on a culinary level. I know not even whether milk and blood could easily be brought to homogenize.”

Graham is curious, despite himself. He is repulsed, certainly, but at once he wonders, morbidly, how it is done, not simply how Lecter excuses the behaviour to himself, but how he goes about his ghoulish pastime. He cannot keep himself from wondering. Lecter is a highly unusual man, a highly unusual killer; Graham can admit that in the relative safety of his own skull.

Psychopaths, as a rule, do not play their part so well as Lecter, who for all appearances maintains a successful psychiatric practice, a thriving social life, and an impenetrable shell of warm, demure humanity to conceal and protect the arch and soulless man that lies beneath. They hurt people, psychopaths, in ways big and small, intentional or otherwise, through their impulsivity, their callousness, their selfishness. Most don't have the patience for an extended tertiary education, nor the control for an openly law-abiding lifestyle. Generally, the impression of cold, superhuman intelligence of many psychopaths is no more than an illusion, the side-effect of an almost robotic hyper-rationality.

Whatever Lecter is... it is not that.

“You don't... not with kids.” Graham swallows and his voice gains in certainty. “You don't.”

“No. Never.” A flicker of what can only be indecision flickers momentarily in Lecter's eyes, before he takes out a bottle of wine and pours himself a glass. “What is deplorable in an adult is perfectly forgivable in a child, albeit, in need of correction. Children cannot be held accountable for their actions. If they are ill-mannered, if they are impertinent, if they are inhumane... well, they are children. They do what they do from ignorance and incomprehension of respect and moral law. It is an innocence, in a certain manner of speaking. They have yet to develop the tools to understand another's heart, and so... they are cruel.” Here is a smile, far more free and light than his custom. It is fond. Reminiscent. Brief. “I too was a cruel child.” A darkness comes over Lecter, clouding his brow, and the echo of grief that Graham feels is as vast and old as the sea.

Lecter's expression empties again, and he pushes the milk towards Graham's elbow with two fingers.

Graham doesn't want to drink. It will just make him hungry, open him to the clawing ache of emptiness, and even the thought is a nauseous one. Still, his saliva is thick and viscous on his tongue, his lips rough and peeling, and so he drinks.

“You don't strike me as the type for kids.”

“Oh, not at all. They are nasty, sticky little things, and I quite despise them, but it is not so important what they are as what they can be, if given the means to grow.” Lecter takes a long sip. “I could never see myself as a father.”

Graham makes a noise in the back of his throat that is one part curiosity, two parts agreement. There are some things no child should have as a parent, and they neither begin nor end with Lecter, who would at least be doting and emotionally present, regardless other glaring defects. Small drops of milk collect in Graham's stubble, and the hot clenching dread of a straight-razor at his throat hits him hard. He conspires to wipe it away with some subtlety, and Lecter... laughs. Chuckles, of all things.

Something clicks, the tumblers of a heavy lock falling into place. “Are... are you *drunk?*”

“Becoming intoxicated in public is in terribly poor taste. For all that one may praise the virtues of hedonism, it does not to to act in a manner so bacchanal among one's peers and colleagues. Drunkenness is frowned upon, while merry indulgence has the full blessing of polite society.” Lecter tilts his head, but does not smile, and somehow, someway, it is at once expressionless and haughty. “I am not drunk by any reasonable definition of the word.”

“Just merry.”

“I failed to make time for dinner. Foolish of me. The concession at the Opera house has higher quality drinks than repasts.”

“Oh?”

Lecter makes a face. “They sell Twizzlers. Wine and Twizzlers.”

“Has anyone ever...?” Graham mimes drinking from a straw, and Lecter shudders.

Gingerly, Graham picks up the glass and tilts the last of the milk into his mouth. Lecter watches every motion, poised like a serpent in the grass spying upon a nervous mouse. The anxious unease Graham has tried to quell returns, curling deep in his gut.

“Would you care to join me?”

“...Wine?”

“Whiskey?”

“Yes, I think.” *Play along, play along.*

Lecter hands him two tumblers and fetches a small decanter of muted amber. He unlocks a small door leading out onto a small balcony, well hidden by the thick foliage of climbing plants and two healthy maples, where he pours them both a neat finger. Lecter inhales deeply, taking in the heady scent long before he deigns to sample it on his tongue, and Graham mirrors him unconsciously.

“Scotch?”

“Highland Park.”

Graham laughs despite himself. “But of course. You know, I was always more of a Wild Turkey and Jim Beam kind of guy. Though, for this, maybe I could adapt.”

They lean against the railing and drink in silence for a time. This feels like something it shouldn't, like something normal, like what he imagines friends to be. Two pretend people make a pretense of friendship. Like a play within a play. Graham looks down into the fenced space a story down. Concrete, unfortunately. A good way to court a broken ankle.

“You could make some distance, enough to find assistance at least. The pain would be... more than a hindrance, but I have faith in your perseverance.”

“I couldn't. You'd kill them, wouldn't you?” Graham finds no answers in the bottom of the tumbler, but that's a truth he's known for a long, long time. “Anyone I went to for help, anyone who saw me.”

“Yes.”

“And then you'd what? Break my hands, wasn't it? You go to a great deal of effort to encourage behaviour you'll only have to punish. Is that what you want?”

Lecter pours them both another finger in lieu of an answer.

“Lecter,” He should stop talking. His hands are shaking, his skin prickling into goosebumps, but he stays where he is, merely setting the tumbler down on the rail. “Is that what you want?”

“I once asked you to call me Hannibal.” Lecter's face is blank but for his eyes, which glitter, dead and shark-like, pupils large and dark. There is always a indefinable coldness to Lecter, an inhuman chill that touches every movement and gesture, no matter how amiable, no matter how pleasant, but this is something else entirely. He is less a spider in his web and more a great old thing, neither a demon or a god, or, at least, not a new god. He lives without reference to morality or mortals, as something neither good nor evil, merely existent. The world shudders, shakes with the cries of invisible stars, and Graham has to close his eyes. It's all too real, the incessant buzz of Lecter's strange emotions, the luminous glow of the half moon, the cold metal railing between him and a nasty fall, and he finds himself small and flimsy alongside the world beneath and above. The boards beneath their feet creak, and even without opening his eyes, he knows that Lecter has stepped closer, into his personal space, and he isn't ready for this.

“What do you want, Hannibal?”

“You are afraid of me.”

“I'm afraid of a lot of things. Most things.”

“I offend you.”

“You *eat people.*”

Lecter cups Graham's cheek, sliding his hand down to the pulse in Graham's neck, and it is soft and gentle and intimate and utterly false, and he knows that if he opens his eyes, nothing will meet him but Lecter's cold, cruel eyes, his true face disturbing after so long hidden, just below the surface, like the white of a skull where the flesh has been stripped away. “Is it really you who is offended?”

“Yes.”

“You care a great deal for the opinions of those who would condemn you in the same breath as they condemn myself.”

“And?”

“And there is nothing offensive in what you are, in what you can do, even by your own standards. You see into the heart of things – on occasion, the heart of the darkest that humanity has to offer – but you see, you understand. It is a beautiful thing, your sight, and you would blind yourself for the sake of banal morality, you would reduce yourself for the sake of ignorant, selfish children.” Lecter exhales heavily. “Much of your pain is in your own self-flagellation for insights and understandings which you cannot control. That was the reason for which you left your position as an officer, was it not? You are not culpable for what you see, no matter how terrible.” Lecter runs his fingers down Graham's swollen wrist. “Nor are you culpable for my actions against you, and you should not let them hurt you so.”

Graham's throat and eyes burn from far more than alcohol. “It's late, isn't it?”

“Or early, depending on one's view of things.”

“I'd like to see the sunrise.”

He feels Lecter's amusement through his eyelids, and Lecter presses the tumbler back into his hand, folding his fingers around the glass before he lets go, and returns with the decanter to the kitchen.

Graham finishes the last of the scotch, watching out over the balcony, and waits for Lecter to return. He is too numb even to hate himself for it.

Chapter End Notes

Apologies, fine readers, for the delay. The beginning of September makes fools of us all. Thank you all for your kind comments and your continued patronage.

They do, in fact, sell Twizzlers at opera houses. What a world.

Chapter 29

She doesn't look at her father.

Abigail Hobbs boards the thrumming, impatient train, her father at her side, a voiceless golem, a silent guardian. His hand presses soft on the nape of her neck to guide and to shelter from the crush of the crowd. Her father is a quiet man, and kind. He listens, patient and attentive as she chirps and chatters about friends and school, and remains content to live in silence when her voice ends.

Still, she does not look.

They take their seats as the train rumbles and creaks, crawling slow along the platform, hesitant but gaining in speed and confidence as they leave the station behind.

They are quiet together, and it is not at all a lonely thing. It's a lot like the woods, when they are just the two of them, just father and daughter and hunters and nothing else, but the murmur of human voices surround them, just above the dull roar of the train, so perhaps it is more like get-togethers with family and friends, where her mother flits about the room, bright and cheerful as a thrush in spring, and her father retreats to an unobtrusive perch in the kitchen, an already solitary man who further shrinks and fades in the presence of her grandfather. She joins him, always, with some excuse of having been abandoned by her younger cousins, but the truth lies somewhere between their ceaseless adolescent martyrdom and the little smile that lights upon his lips when she leans with him against the counter, watching their guests come and go like ambling, unwary does.

He dotes on her, in his own quiet way. He has watched her grow, his only daughter and only child, with all the awe and reverence of an ancient astronomer witnessing the birth of a star, had taken to fatherhood with the joy of an explorer on expedition to the face of a new and wondrous planet, with the fevered dedication of a true believer at the foot of the temple.

He presses his lips to her brow, as he has hundreds of times, and strokes his thumb in a gentle path along the back of her neck, and it both soothes her and fills her with dread. This hand that braided her hair, this hand that tucked her into bed, this hand that showed her how to set a trap, to tie a lure, to handle a rifle, to honour a kill... He was her teacher and guardian and she his world entire. She still is, and she wonders if it was something in her that twisted him, warped the father she knew, or if it was there all along, deep in his marrow, a seeping, sleeping sickness waiting to burst into fever. Was there anything that could have stopped it? Could stop it now-

She shies from the idea, even as her gut twists in revulsion, her body following through to the natural conclusion of the thought, even as her mind rejects all knowledge, all understanding. In a place deeper than reason, older than language, she knows it's going to happen again, and that the only way to stay safe, the only way to survive is to smile, is to rest calm and complacent, is to keep her mind from lingering on the image of happy girls twisted and broken like ill-used dolls.

She doesn't look at her father, because if she doesn't look, then she doesn't have to see.

Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Lecter dislikes killing women. Which is not to say that he has not done so, nor that he will not do so again, which is not to say that the female of the species is the fairer. Painted lips are no less likely to speak bile and poison – and soft hands are far more likely to end in claws.

Nevertheless, there is something disquieting to killing a woman – there is not the same height to the thrill, not the same rush to the release, and if it is not a difference in the nature of the sex – if they are no less petty in their thoughts and no less vile in their manner, then he is forced to conclude that the bias lurks within himself, within his own heart, within his own mind.

It is not unusual, of course, for a serial killer to express a preference in terms of gender or class or race. The killer that Crawford and his team chase like a pack of old anosmic hounds certainly has a type, as it were, but in general these preferences are for practical reasons, accessibility, or they are necessary to the fantasy itself.

Rudeness is a universal quality, one that knows no border. His actions are not born of desire, of fantasy, of biased hatred or of confused lust. His hand is divine justice, visited on crawling, petty worms, and nothing more. Though he strives for sensuality, for art, to elevate in death the lowly and the vile, to attribute a sexual element to any act performed with such creatures would be almost bestial.

Certainly, the former Mr. Hawkins hardly resembles anything that once was human as cuts and bags the excess from what he has taken for his cold room, all the better for quiet, unobtrusive disposal. Graham's words come to him now, unwanted guests. *"You're no better."* He dismisses the thought. He has certainly never stooped to the crude venality of the elderly and corpulent Mr. Hawkins, who lavished prime positions and primer promotions on friends and relatives through his position in the arts council – much to the detriment of the local arts community. Still, it angers him. Despite the time he has had to cool his head, he returns like the proverbial dog to their conversation. He has let Graham affect him far more than he should.

Nevertheless, he wonders, why not Mrs. Hawkins? Skeletal, pretentious, and just as vile as her late husband. Why not the indiscreet and intrusive widow Donaldson? Why not the opportunistic and forward new Mrs. Steele? Why *Mr.* Hawkins? Gender, no matter what else it may be, is primarily a construction of society. The weight of millennia upon millennia of tradition molds each human according to its design, its vision, dividing them into man and woman. Which is not to say that it is not important. One's gender is no less a part of one's identity for all that it is not inherent, innate. That he is male and that he is masculine has guided his formation, his life, his place within society, and that is no small thing. What is female and what is feminine is other to him. He knows that no true divide exists between one and the other; nevertheless, he is certain in his place on one side. For all of that, however, he does not fear femininity within himself or within others.

What is female is not necessarily feminine, what is feminine is not necessarily weak, what is weak is not necessarily wrong. There can be great strength in nurturing and caring. It expresses power on the side of the giver. Dominance. Like parent over child, like doctor over patient. Those in one's care are dependent on that care, and it's loss or even the threat thereof can be something crippling, a deep blow to their stability and security, but just as often, the reverse is also the case, and the one who nurtures becomes twisted in the very strings of attachment they weave. To care is a knife with two edges.

He thinks now of halcyon childhood days haloed in golden nostalgia by the wear of years and high, girlish laughter that breaks the cold air. It darkens his mood considerably, and he forces his attention elsewhere. He will return to the idea another time, when he is not so distracted, so melancholy.

After saying a proper goodbye to the late Mr. Hawkins, it is very late indeed, or perhaps it is better to say that it is rather very early, the sun long abed in these cold autumn days and the world lit by harsh streetlights and the silver face of the distant moon.

He finds himself drawn not to his usual haunts, not to the Wyman Park Dell, not to Reservoir Hill, but to the bay. He finds himself drawn not to the harbour where families from within and without the city bring their children on warm afternoons, but to the port in all it's industrial ugliness. He finds himself watching the sun rise over the Chesapeake bay and thinks, *You're no better.*

Chapter End Notes

> Interestingly, though Lecter's female victims are emphasized on the show, taking the foreground through much of the first season, in the literary canon, Lecter's victims are, to my knowledge, overwhelmingly male. (A commenter has reminded me of the maimed nurse at the Maryland institute for the criminally insane, whom I had nearly forgotten, but for the official list of Lecter's murder victims, each is listed as male or unknown.)
>
> ...Please don't eat me.

Chapter 31

Lecter swirls the pale pink rosé in his glass in the tasteful fall of natural light permitted by the long wall of windows, softened by the careful neutrality of the translucent beige drapes of Du Maurier's office. He inhales deeply, before taking a slow, measured sip. He swallows before speaking. "We had an argument."

Du Maurier does not need him to explain to whom he refers. "Another argument. A more serious argument than your last?" She tilts her head, considering, always considering, as the fates weigh and measure the folly of man, long before they weave it into the great tapestry of existence, disinterested, yes, but not uninterested. "Or perhaps simply a continuation of the last?"

Lecter smiles, an expression that Du Maurier returns more warmly, but coolly all the same - the chill of a fall day to that of the depth of an unending winter whose frost has killed all but the oldest, deepest of roots. "Not another, not a continuation, the very same. He and I have largely reconciled, though I do not believe that he truly forgives me, not yet, and we are once again on speaking terms. We have even discussed the original point of contention quite civilly, and for all that we have not returned to the ease of before, I do not doubt that in time he will come to see matters as I do."

"But it still bothers you. What he said."

Lecter finishes his drink and sets the glass on the side-table. "It is more than that. More than the words, no matter how cutting."

Du Maurier nods. "More than the words, there is the fact of vulnerability."

"Yes, though as you have often reminded me, vulnerability is the currency of friendship. He knows me, better than anyone else has for a very long time."

"He knows you, and thus, he may harm you, should he so decide. You accepted this when you made him your companion." Du Maurier purses her lips. "It bothers you, that he tolerates but does not accept an integral part of your self."

"The gulf between tolerance and acceptance is a wide one. Difficult to cross, though easier once the first is achieved. Abhorrence may be brought to hatred, may be brought to tolerance, may be brought to acceptance, even joy and love. He tolerates in me that which he once abhorred, but he continues to hate that same impulse, that same nature within himself."

"Is it possible, Hannibal, that this reflection of yourself that you see in him is just that, a reflection? Is it possible that you have projected foreign emotions upon him against his will, a nature that he does not share?"

"Do you truly think me so blind? We are not the same, he and I, but we are more alike than any other I have ever known. I am not so foolish as to see my own reflection in ever rock and tree – only the smooth, still pond."

"I don't doubt your power of observation, Hannibal, few see as much or as clearly as you do, but you'll understand that I can't help but wonder if your emotional proximity to this man who has caught your attention has clouded your judgement: he is a being independent of your influence, and you cannot have complete control over who he is, nor over who he becomes. It wouldn't be healthy if you did. To subsume a person's autonomy in that way can be damaging- catastrophically so."

Lecter says nothing, and Du Maurier pours him another glass of wine.

When Lecter returns to his office, his phone chimes. He check his watch, and yes, it is the precise time of the weekly appointment of Madeline Schwartz. He sits at his desk and put the phone on speaker. “Madeline, how is Minnesota?”

“Cold. Wind. Snow. It’s alright, I suppose.”

He retrieves the scalpel from the edge of the desk and sharpens the pencil with short, confident strokes, allowing Madeline to continue as she will.

She clears her throat. “Another girl missing this week. People are scared. Wary. There’s a lot of police, and nobody walks alone. Silly, of course. People die in a million petty ways every day, and ten missing girls missing in a city of 400,000 doesn’t mean much. More likely to get hit by a car.”

The pencil in his hand moves with a will of its own, soft graphite forming the elegant lines of a strong, worn hand he knows almost as well as his owns, though others would struggle to identify it in isolation, deprived as they are of his power of memory. “Are you afraid, Madeline?”

“Afraid of what?” She asks, genuine curiosity coloring her voice, making no connection between the question and their conversation.

“Dying. Whether by the hand of an unseen mad-man in the dark of night or by the destructive physics of momentum in the crosswalk of a city street by the light of day.” He shapes the long fingers, the masculine bones that form the subject of his study. He captures every crease and line, every fine detail. “Does that frighten you?”

"...no?" She pauses and hums. "Not really? I'll die eventually, but eventualities aren't something over which one should fret, so I don't think about it much, I guess. Other people dying is more upsetting, because they go away- they're not there anymore."

"And you don't find the end of your own existence so difficult to digest."

Her response is a whisper this time, barely audible, with a slight waver that does not fade. "If I die, I won't be around to get upset, will I?"

He drops that particular line of questioning, allowing her to continue on to the little curiosities with which she has busied her mind since they last spoke, but the uncertainty in her voice never quite recedes. Shortly before the end of their session, she states, unprompted, "They look like me, those missing girls."

He does not interrupt her, continuing instead to shade his study of Graham's hand.

"No," She corrects herself. "I look like them."

She asks him no question, so he gives her no answer, meaningful or otherwise. She makes a small frustrated noise in the back of her throat, an odd mewl of displeasure that he refuses to resolve her confusion, that he isn't playing by the rules as she has come to understand them.

She asks, subdued, if she can call again next week, to which he assents.

Chapter 32

Graham feels them, the nails of grasping, rotting hands scratching, pulling, clawing at his flesh from within. The pressure builds in his throat as dead fingers press against the walls of his esophagus, gagging him, choking him, suffocating him from the inside with their decaying hands, strong as death, strong as the guilt that plagues him, but only lurks in the echo of his thoughts as his lungs scream for air, as the muscles of his throat clench and clench with every silent scream and futile retch, as fingers stripped of flesh press into the flat of his tongue.

He crumples to his hands and knees, twitching and convulsing, as black, viscous bile streaks down his chin and drips, thick and bubbling with a froth built from his every shallow, panicked gasp, to land upon the subtle finery of the hardwood floor his own nails scratch and streak, weaker and weaker, the last protests of an animal dead and dying. He sinks into an ever-widening pool of his own black spittle, eyes glassy and limbs finally still.

There is a long moment of disorientation when he blinks and finds himself sitting in front of an unfamiliar vanity, his own reflection staring stupidly back at him. Beyond the surprise on his own mirrored face, all appears well: none of the staccato horror of the waking nightmares that lurk behind his eyes nor the roiling terror that comes to him when his scrambling, panicked mind finally finds sleep, or at the very least unconsciousness, but he does not know this room, does not know how he came to be here, does not know the walls or the floor or the bed or the door.

He freezes, like a rabbit under the wings of a hawk when second face comes into focus alongside his own, a dark skull that resolves into Lecter, a few feet behind where he sits, watching him, and Graham does not know what he has done, whether he has already revealed the extent of his confusion, his weakness.

Lecter smiles, as much as he ever does, which is not so much a smile as the same neutral face with the faint impression of the pleasure of a bullfrog at the buzzing of a particularly dimwitted fly. Lecter leans in behind him and tilts his head just so to inhale deeply at Graham's neck. Graham deliberately, desperately, does not flinch.

"Did- did you just smell me?"

Lecter does smile this time, genuinely, like the proud master of a dog that has learned a difficult new trick. "Yes." Lecter selects a set of silver scissors from the desk of the vanity as well as a comb. "Now, tell me, William, how was your day?"

"Oh, you know, woke up, went to the office, answered some emails, taught a class, drove home, fed the dogs." Graham snorted. "I stared at the ceiling for a couple hours and read Moby Dick again. I now know far more about the intricacies of whaling than I ever wanted or needed to know, I think there is some funny business going on between Queequeg and Ishmael, and quite frankly, I'm starting to get seasick." His reflection is cleanshaven, and he doesn't know how or when or why it came to pass.

Lecter runs the comb through Graham's hair and begins to cut and clip, damp locks falling to Graham's shoulders and to the floor where they curl into s-bends and semi-circles. "Is this how you ask for a larger selection of literature? As you know, I would be more than happy to provide."

"At what price?"

"Nothing at all, for this."

As his hair falls, his vision doubles strangely. He blinks to clear it to no avail. His ears ring and the smell of rotten flesh fills his nose and mouth. The cloying, sickening scent remains even as his vision clears. There is something shifting, writhing in the darkness of the mirror, big and angry, something that the wildest, most primal part of his brain recognizes as a monster, as danger and death, and he has to close his eyes, to stop in from slipping into his blank, waiting mind. A skeletal hand cards through Graham's hair and a subtle interplay of artemisia and bergamot mingles and mixes with that of rot and fear and blood as Lecter leans forward and whispers against the shell of his ear, no lips, just the bare, grimacing teeth of a fleshless skull. "What do you see?"

He sees himself standing, grabbing sharp, silver scissors and twisting, bringing them down and forcing them into the belly of his captor (prisoner) and bathing in the dark red of a severed vein, pushing him down, bringing him to the ground, pinning him and licking the blood from his fingers, from his hands, sticking his tongue out to capture little red smears around his mouth, upon his lips. He looks down at himself, victorious; he looks up at himself, defeated. He bends down, teeth ready. He devours and is devoured.

He opens his eyes, and he is sitting in the kitchen, watching Lecter's back as he fries something on the oventop. "Will you be eating tonight, William?"

"I won't give in to you."

"You will."

The walls blur and run like fresh paint on the side of an old boat, like the cheap mascara of a bruised woman who cries as she gives her statement, like the condensation on a pitcher of ice-cold sweet tea. The world melts around him and he melts with it.

He opens his eyes, and he is sitting, leaning against the wall, Herman Melville's Moby Dick in his hands, though he can't read the words on the page, and perhaps it has all been a dream, but he reaches up, and his hair is shorter than it was.

Chapter 33

The path of starvation in human beings is one very different from those of other animals - it is longer, slower, the mind still bright and strong even as the body cannibalizes itself, consuming first fat, then muscle, before the body, unable to sustain the gaping, hollow hunger or biological existence, allows its thin limbs to slow, its confused thoughts to fade into sluggish darkness, and its weak, irregular heart to rest, to cease its futile fight to push blood red with oxygen from failing lungs through arteries that lead only to numb hands and a panicked brain in the last spasms of death.

There are ways, of course, of slowing the process, of delaying the inevitable deterioration of body and mind with which Lecter is intimately familiar. A low level calorie intake, no matter how extreme the deprivation, may extend the lifespan of the starved body for months or even years.

Nevertheless, it is clear when weakness and confusion come to Graham: when his hands begin to shake and shiver, when his teeth begin to chatter with some unfelt chill, when his tongue trips and his words grow jumbled and nonsensical. He wavers, on occasion, faded and uncertain, as if he does not know, does not understand where or when he is - as if he is somewhere else, his eyes seeing not the walls before them, but some other time and place, another time and place he once knew or he once imagined or perhaps a fresh new horror beyond anything he had ever seen or thought. Sometimes he frowns, his face crumpled and withdrawn. Sometimes he smiles faintly - happy, but disbelieving, mistrusting of joy and contentment, even as the momentary pleasure of the hallucinations of his enfeebled mind pull him along. More often, he sits, pale and wane, his eyes flickering, darting, watching nightmares dance across the wall in a bloody ballet for him alone. It is not necessarily a typical reaction to the situation, but Graham has never been a typical man, always susceptible to vivid delusion and strange flights of imagination, and perhaps this is his equally strange mind's way of coping, of denying the reality of its slow starvation.

Lecter watches Graham lose his mind the way a snake watches a mongoose shudder and jerk as the venom in its bloodstream corrupts its nervous system and reaches its vital organs. He is primarily lucid, but he grows weaker, more fluid, more detached, with every passing day. Graham drifts between one state and the other like un unmoored ship, and Lecter waits, curious and ever-patient, for him to ground himself on the nearest sandbar or coral reef, for him to cease his wavering struggles and crash.

The first sign of Graham's advancing deterioration comes the day Lecter leads him to a chair in the master suite and curls his fingers around the handles of a set of silver scissors. Graham had been quiet, subdued, perhaps even a touch absent that morning, but in no way that would indicate anything more concerning than a low mood. He brightens, clears briefly as Lecter takes up his scissors and comb, before dimming with a sudden confusion. He pales and sweats, staring into the mirror before him with a dawning fear.

Lecter leans in close and whispers, hushed as not to sartle, "What do you see?"

Graham whimpers, muscles tensing, nostrils flaring, but wide, wild eyes remained fixed on his own reflection. He raises one hand to his throat and shudders violently, sweat beading across his forehead, along his upper lip. His eyes begin to move, fast and faster, moving back and forth rapidly in a twisted parody of dreaming. His adam's apple bobs as he swallows hard, and he lets out a high, strangled whimper, not unlike a frightened dog.

Lecter puts the scissors aside - well out of reach - and wraps an arm around Graham's shoulders, threading the other hand through Graham's freshly-washed hair. He whispers into curve of Graham's ear, his tone soothing, his words like dark, bloodied opals that drop from his lips. "Hush, dear William. Don't be afraid. You allow your nightmares to chase you like a fox flushed by the hounds, but you need not be frightened - not when you might become much greater, much more terrible, than those petty horrors. You could live a life free of the fear of becoming if you would only become."

The sun shines down on the heads of a colourful, teeming crowd of some of the brightest youths of a generation - a unseasonably warm day where college students walked to class, still cheerful, smiles bright, the semester only begun and midterms and finals yet far away and far from mind, where precocious high-schoolers flit in tight groups or flanked by puzzled and harried parents, planning out their futures with the bright light of hope glittering in their eyes.

For all the high optimism in the air, there is a undercurrent of uncertainty, a frisson of fear carried along by the gentle autumn breeze along with the scent of late-blooming lilacs mingled with freshly cut grass. Young women watch the surrounding masses with a barely-hidden suspicion, noticeably unhappy and noticeably subdued. They walk in tight clusters, never wandering too far from eyesight and earshot of their companions, like nervous gazelles who sense that danger is only as far as next patch of long grass.

One young woman with long brown hair stands alone, in the middle of the engineering quad with a mildly perplexed expression, her eyebrows together, her mouth in a gentle pout, squinting against the harsh light of the sun and scanning faces with growing frustration.

She is about to give up and move on, when a voice from behind says, "Do you need any help?" She turns and finds herself looking into a reflection - a strange reflection, distorted like a flawed mirror. The doppelganger smiles sweetly, kindly, waiting for a reply. The girl only stares, and her reflection becomes hesitant. "Were- are you looking for someone?"

The girl cocks her head. "I was."

Chapter 34

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“M-my name’s Madeline, Madeline Schwartz. Who are you?”

Abigail Hobbs wonders sometimes if other girls are like her. They look like her. They dress like her. They laugh like her and smile like her. But she wonders, on the inside, if they feel like her, think like her, walk through the world like a puppet on invisible strings, smiling and laughing, faces bright, while their minds click and whirr, calculating, ever calculating, watching, ever watching. She wonders if their faces are like hers, innocent masks stitched over old wounds and scars and the wit of a wily doe, eternally alert for a danger they know may any moment be upon them, stripped as they are of all naivety by the cruelty of nature.

She wonders if they are scared.

The girl from the quad - Madeline, Madeline Schwartz - doesn’t seem scared, doesn’t seem frightened, not of Abigail, at least. She’s nervous, but nervous in the way that small dogs in handbags are nervous: constantly anxious, but without any real cause beyond temperament. Abigail smiles the friendly, gentle smiles she smiles for shy, anxious girls far from home. “Hi Madeline, I’m Abigail.”

Madeline tilts her head, almost birdlike. “Oh. Oh no. That’s not who you are. That’s just what you’re called. Who are you? Who is Abigail?”

“I- Well, I’m me. I’m Abigail and Abigail is me. I’m boring. It’s not important who I am.”

“No, no, no, that is the most important thing.”

There’s something strange, something odd and knowing about Madeline’s wide, unblinking eyes, and Abigail shifts uncomfortably, on edge, and moves to shift the focus of the conversation from herself. “It’s really not. Besides, you haven’t told me anything about yourself. Who is Madeline, anyway?”

“Madeline Schwartz, twenty-two, student of medicine, youngest child of five. Favourite colour periwinkle. Three cacti, named Ludwig, Liselotte, and Kevin respectively. Cheap shoes, expensive therapist. Hereditary hypertension.” Madeline hunches her shoulders and furrows her brow - embarrassed? “Afraid of vacuum cleaners.”

“Wow, I’m surprised you didn’t tell me your social insurance number.”

“I don’t know my social insurance number.” Madeline tilts her head owlishly.

“Um, well, I’m a senior in highschool. I’m looking at colleges this year. I thought about going out-of-state, but I think it would be hard on my parents, especially my dad. ...you don’t look twenty-two - you look my age.”

“Thanks, I bathe in the blood of virgins.”

“Well… it’s a good look on you.”

Madeline smiles and ducks her head shyly.

Abigail smiles back, more genuinely this time. Madeline’s odd, stilted phrases and her stiff, strange posture remind her of a little boy who sat in the back of her sixth-grade class, the one who never spoke to anyone and spent all of math drawing pictures of birds. “You’re a bit weird, aren’t you?”

Madeline sniffs. “I’m not a bit weird, Miss Abigail. I’m very weird.”

“You shouldn’t make those kinds of jokes, you know, about blood and death and stuff. You don’t know how people will take it.”

“Why not? No one would ever joke about such a thing if they really did it - or at least, no one would ever believe it even if they did - after all, what could be more absurd than a killer who jokes about killing?”

“...No one would ever guess.” Abigail’s smile fades. “No one would ever know.”

“No one would ever know.” Madeline echos, then tilts her head further, twisting her neck and body with until her chin is higher than her eyes. “You look sad, now.”

Abigail smiles returns. “What? I’m not.”

Madeline leans closer and squints. “Nope, still sad.”

“Are you calling me a liar?”

“Yup. But don’t worry. Most people are.”

“Are you a liar too?”

“Lying is bad.” Madeline scowls, like a small child. Abigail feels, in a way, that she is speaking to a child, but also that she is speaking to someone years, decades older, strangely innocent and strangely wise.

Abigail scowls back, lightly mocking. “That’s not really a no.”

Of all things- she giggles and hides her mouth behind her hand. “No, it isn’t.”

It’s then that Abigail makes her decision - she, Madeline, is odd, undoubtedly odd, too-large eyes gazing always somewhere beyond Abigail’s shoulder, but friendly, harmless... docile. She isn’t - she’s not exactly right, but she’ll come easy. She’ll do.

Abigail smiles brighter. “Will you tell the truth if I get you some ice-cream?”

“I will reveal the secrets of all the universe, but only if it’s butterscotch.”

“Let’s hope they have butterscotch, then.”

They leave together, Madeline, Abigail, and the weight of her father’s eyes.

Lecter turns down an invitation to travel with the FBI to Minnesota, as does the inimitable Dr. Bloom. While he has no small curiosity as to the inner-workings of the FBI, with no new bodies, though one more disappearance, and vanishingly little new evidence and lines of investigation, there is truly no need for his skills so close to the front lines - and it is better to maintain a distance that allows him to observe without being observed himself, a necessity thrown into sharp relief after only a handful of interactions with Agent Crawford’s fibre specialist, one Beverly Katz, a woman with a sharp mind, a wicked tongue, asiatic features, a Jewish surname, and a New England accent - a testament to the plurality and free opportunity offered by the best of American society and American values, so often undermined by its worst. Agent Katz is certainly the intellectual equal of Dr. Bloom, with the added danger that she has far fewer biases in regards to Lecter himself, and she is certainly as nosy and as dogged as Agent Crawford and not so easily charmed. He has no doubt he could remove the threat she poses should the need arise, but it would be a shame to snuff out so bright and singular a star. The others pay him little, if any curiosity, as a peripheral and likely temporary part of the investigation, though no doubt if he did more than flit briefly through their circles, they would pay him more mind.

Too, he is loathe to stray long from his life, his practice, his home. It could easily be accomplished with a few calls and a few preparations, but his priorities have shifted, as of late.

After seeing Mr. Froidevaux out the door, he stops at a small market along East 32nd and Barclay, where he spies a rather handsome yet odious man, a Mr. Turner, who frequents performances by the orchestra and turns every conversation to his successful but exceedingly boring law firm. Lecter follows him for a while, at a distance, with no real seriousness or intent. He occupies himself a few pleasant minutes by shadowing his prey, unnoticed, unremarked, unseen, and imaging what he might do. A deep, anonymous grave would do fine, but it would it not be better to lift his face from his skull with a scalpel install him in a hall of mirrors, betwixt infinite twisting reflections? Soon however, he tires of the game, as it is without acceptable win-conditions.

He refocuses, makes his necessary purchases. He brings each to his nose to test for freshness - the ginger is particularly pungent, sharp and spicy, particularly to his highly-attuned senses.

He fetches Graham as soon as he arrives home. In general, Graham’s eyes are upon him from the moment he opens the door to the guest room, tracking his every movement, and Graham would certainly never willingly give Lecter his back. Today, however, Graham doesn’t even stir as he steps into the room. He lies fully-dressed, sprawled and prone, upon the bed. He breathes slowly, heavily, as if deep beneath the spells of Morpheus, but his eyes are half open, pupils darting to watch some unknown dream that plays across his unconscious mind, when Lecter circles the bed to face him.

Lecter places two fingers across the soft flesh beside the trachea and above the rhythmic pulse in Graham's throat - steady, but weak. "Will? You need to wake up, Will."

Graham shivers, swallows, his adam's apple moving against Lecter's fingertips. He groans and rolls onto his back. His eyes flutter, then close.

A diet of pre-packaged juice and factory-sealed milk has done Will Graham few favours. While more than adequate to keep him alive and relatively healthy, the mature human body is not designed to maintain weight on liquid alone, and milk, whatever its virtues in sustaining mammalian offspring, is by no means nutritionally complete. It is lucky that Graham comes from primarily western european stock, as that greatly reduces the likelihood of lactose intolerance, and Graham is highly suspicious of the nutritional supplements Lecter plies him with. Indeed, Lecter cannot be certain whether Graham has been taking them or merely hiding them against the inside of his cheek to spit out later.

He should pin Graham, hold him down and his jaw open, massage his throat until he swallows, but he is uncertain whether it would do him more damage than good. It is one matter to do such a thing to a goose, an animal, and quite another to do it to… Graham. There is a sense of wrongness to it - an impoliteness and inelegance, particularly in regards to a guest.

Graham's stubbornness may eventually force his hand.

Lecter tuts, grabs Graham's nose, and pinches hard, cutting off air. Graham hisses and flails, scratching at Lecter's arm, still clothed in his thick fall coat, and pulling away. Lecter releases easily, and Graham pushes himself weakly onto all fours. "Can you stand or should I carry you?"

"I can stand. Don't- don't touch me." Graham rolls off of the bed, movements clumsy. He walks steadily enough, but stumbles on the bare, even floor of the hall as they walk to the kitchen. He hides the misstep, as much as he can, but they both know that Lecter has seen it. An uncomfortable thing, to show weakness in the predator's own den, within the monster's own jaws.

When Graham takes his usual seat, Lecter places a small bottle of extra-strength aspirin at his elbow. A peace offering of a kind - the stress of hunger has agitated an already high propensity for headaches and has made Graham irritable, more irritable, that is. Graham plucks it from the table and immediately checks the seal. "You don't have anything stronger? Ibuprofen… paracetamol… colt .45…?"

Lecter ignores him to reheat the broth he made the evening before. "How was your day?"

Graham grunts, peals back the seal, pours himself a handful of little pills, and knocks them back, tilting his chins up and swallowing them dry. He grimaces. "Dunno. Slept most of it."

"Would more sunlight help, do you think? We can read tomorrow on the balcony, if you would like."

Graham pauses. "You don't have work?"

Lecter hums as he slices vegetables, bringing the blade of the chef's knife down with a rapid, clean efficiency that would make even a Legumier of the highest caliber despair for envy. "One of the privileges of self employment in a field like my own - I am never obligated to work a Saturday."

"Saturday… tomorrow is Saturday." Grahams sighs, closes his eyes, and massages the bridge of his nose. "Well. How was your day, then?"

Lecter tells him, not going into great depth in regards to his patients - confidentiality must mean something, after all, and it doesn't suit his purposes to reveal anything before its time - but sparing no detail in regards to the ongoing investigation in Minnesota. Graham leans forward, perhaps involuntarily, hanging on every word like a feral dog to particularly juicy waste-bin scraps.

"Katz is working on this?"

"You know her?"

"Know about her. She's good. They've got Price, of course, no doubt about it. Keller maybe, I heard he joined the lab at Quantico recently. It's a small enough profession, eventually you get to know all the names even if you never see all the faces." Graham's voice is calm yet curious - he speaks in the present tense, but in a distant, dissociated manner, as if this were the life of someone else, of another lifetime, rather than his own as of several months before. "They'll find him." Graham nods uncertainly, then with more confidence. "Speaking of which, kill anyone interesting lately?"

"No one interesting since we last spoke. I had an opportunity to make a house call on a rather banal fellow who makes the rounds in the fine arts community, but I didn't have the proper tools at hand, alas."

"And it would never do to have too many unusual deaths and disappearances within the upper echelons of Baltimore society. Better not to draw attention. Better not to spook the flock."

Lecter looks over his shoulder and smiles - not the slight, controlled public smile, but something with rather more teeth. "Just so."

And Graham - Graham smiles back, at once rueful and chastising. "It's just all so normal to you. Like changing a tire or picking up the kids from daycare. Get up, make some coffee, read the newspaper, check the society pages for a new victim… and it's quotidien. Just another day..."

Lecter shrugs. "One should treat every day as if it were special. Eat good meals, drink good wine…"

"Kill boring people." Graham finished. "Sometimes…" He pauses. Stops.

"Finish your thought, Will. There will be no judgement here."

Grahams laughs, abruptly as if it were startled out of him like a pheasant from the underbrush. He hesitates, then speaks. “Sometimes I think you’re the sanest insane person I’ve ever met.”

“I will take that as a compliment.” Lecter ladles soup into a bowl. “Though I must admit that, from my own perspective, there is no such creature, no firm line separating the two. There is no sanity beyond that on which we ourselves decide.”

“An interesting view for a psychiatrist to hold...” Graham’s voice is deep and warm, tired, and his smile sardonic, but when Lecter places the soup before him, he pales, blood leaving his face, and croaks, as if speaking through a lump in his throat, “What are you doing?”

Lecter stands behind Graham, one hand massaging his shoulder, just above the old pale scar he’s seen there - a long ago stab-wound, if he’s any judge. “You need to eat, Will.”

“I told you: I’m not eating anything you give me. I don’t even know what’s in this.”

“Silkie chicken, wolfberries, ginseng, ginger, red dates, star anise.”

“...You made me chicken soup?”

“That is traditional, is it not?” He leans in, resting his cheek against the dome of Graham’s skull. “Eat.”

“No.” Graham sets his hands against the counter, tensing to push away, but Lecter moves too quickly by far, wrapping his left arm across Graham’s throat, then securing the hold with his right hand around his left wrist, pulling and putting pressure on Graham’s windpipe. Graham tenses, struggles, scrabbles fruitlessly at the countertop for all of two precious seconds, then grabs Lecter’s arm, scratches and digs in - painful, but ultimately ineffective against the thick material of Lecter’s coat. The faint whistle of thin breath pushes in and out of Graham’s nose and Lecter pulls the hold tighter, cutting off the supply of air entirely.

There are two general classifications of choke hold: the first, recommended and taught for combat is the blood choke, where the majority of the pressure placed on an opponent's neck is distributed most heavily against the carotid artery on both sides, which, when properly applied, results in unconsciousness in a matter of seconds; the second, the air choke, where pressure is centered on an opponent’s trachea is far less favoured, given that it can take a few minutes to achieve the same effect as the former technique.

Of course, efficacy is less of a concern if one’s goal is not an opponent’s incapacitation, but a victim’s suffering.

Graham fights for a long time - over a minute and a half - hands clawing, legs kicking, mouth open and gasping, but unable to draw air, then finally slows, the arch of his back slackening and hands growing weak. It is then, before the darkness takes him, that Lecter releases his hold. Graham gasps, coughs wetly, again and again, desperately pulling in air only to choke upon it. His breathing is loud and ragged, but eventually regains some semblance of a rhythm.

“I really must insist. Eat.”

“N-no.”

Graham fully expects the second choke, raises his hands and ducks his head to avoid it, to block Lecter’s arm, but he’s weak, too weak, and it is the work of a moment before his oxygen is cut off once more. Lecter nuzzles into Graham’s hair, inhaling deeply as Graham’s muted struggles and aborted gasps rise in anguish. Graham’s fingers are pinpricks, small points of delicious, burning pain - never sharp enough to gain release, but just enough to make Lecter’s heart pound and to heighten everything - smell, sound, colour. It’s enough to make him regret how the same sleeve that protects his arms prevents the press of skin to skin, prevents the feeling of Graham’s own pulse in his neck as it grows fast, then faint and thready. Lecter loosens the hold, just enough to allow Graham to strain and swallow a narrow stream of air, and even as his grip laxens, Graham’s fingers grow stronger, groping and grasping, pulling and seeking skin. In the window’s reflection Graham mouths, ‘No, no, no.’

“Very well then,” And he tightens his hold once more. Graham thrashes, loses all calm, hands raising not to the arm at his throat but to claw at Lecter’s face, forcing Lecter to lean back, to lose sight of Graham’s reflection. Graham kicks the air futility, a movement that quickly becomes laboured and clumsy as the strength leaves his body… then, he goes limp, strangely limp- he shouldn’t have lost consciousness just yet; perhaps this is simply a trick-

But no, wait. There is a faint tap tap against his arm, open handed but urgent. Tap-out. Surrender. Lecter releases Graham who slumps forward to rest his head against the island counter, breathing hard. Lecter crouches beside him and rubs his back, a soothing motion both strange and somehow right. It is a long time before Graham can speak, and when he does it is in a hoarse whisper. “Oh God. Oh God.”

"Not quite, dear William. Not quite." Lecter smiles and stands, presses a kiss to Graham's temple and retreats to the stove where he serves himself his own bowl of still hot soup. He takes his first bites while Graham is still bowed against the countertop. When Graham raises his head he is disheveled - newly shorn hair in disarray, eyes wet and bloodshot, mouth and nose as red as the rooftops of Bologna with a darker, richer red falling in a slow river from one nostril. Graham gives one final, meek cough, and picks up his spoon with trembling hands.

The smile Lecter gives Graham is painfully unartful, entirely genuine. “So, do you have any plans for tomorrow?”

Chapter End Notes

Don't look at me.

Chapter 35

The bruising around Graham’s throat is a constellation of burst capillaries, a galaxy of blood pooled just beneath the skin - a dark, swirling centre of vivid, violent purple fading out into arms of angry red and sullen blue, too fresh for sour green and sickly yellow. He saw it that morning in the mirror, echoed in the dark circles beneath each eye and the spreading stain of red in the white of the right one. He cannot see it now, lounging on the balcony, but he feels it with every breath, every swallow, every word, as if the bruise extends much deeper, to his very core.

They’ve been out here since the early hours, since the sky itself was still yet bruised with night. Lecter is warmer, affectionate by pale, wan morning light, something more akin to a charmed and charming lover than a kidnapper and serial killer. He reads through news' articles on a slick, modern tablet, with occasional commentary, as Graham reads through the hard-copy newspaper Lecter has given him with as much patience as he can muster, as slowly as he can without his hands shaking, to not owe Lecter any more gratitude that he absolutely must, even as he hungers above all for the anchor of the world outside to give him some sense of reality. They sit side-by-side, Lecter occasionally carding his fingers through Graham's hair as he reads. Breakfast was fresh-squeezed orange juice and an escargot dish of which Graham was deeply suspicious but ate nonetheless, not wishing, not strong enough to disturb the peace once more so soon.

It's the morning after the night before, and it reminds Graham of very different bruises and sensual kisses in the early morning light, for all that he has never had that kind of morning after, that kind of warm, languid ease, even the most intimate moments made stiff and awkward by emotional clumsiness and, at times, the weight of regret. It's a memory, yes, but it isn't his - it's the strange remembrance of a moment, of a life he's never lived.

He remembers other things too - the austere majesty of great european cathedrals, the warmth of the mediterranean sun, the inviting smiles of golden women browned in that very sun, people who he has never known and shall never meet. Memories lay scattered like forgotten toys across his mind, or perhaps like broken glass - strolling along the Seine in the faint evening light, sitting on the dock of the shipyard under the hot, beating sun and swinging his skinny legs, looking out over the Chesapeake bay by the watery dawn. Every day it becomes harder to discern, to decide what is his, what is him, and what is other, what is the pathogen slipping through the blood/brain barrier to infect his sense of self.

It's hardly an unfamiliar sensation - the experience of the person he is and the person he wishes to be subsumed and suffocated - but it had alway been more... diffuse before. People, particularly as a collective were overwhelming, like the kind of undertow that could take a man clear off his feet, abrasive, like steel wool against an exposed nerve, but it's been years, decades since he was so under the complete power and constant influence of a single mind. Since he left home as a bitter, cynical kid, really, fourteen years-old and fed up.

His father's low moods - the drinking, the depression, the unending cycle of lethargy and ennui, of coming home to whatever dilapidated, halfway-to-condemned shack they were

living out of this month to find his father exactly where he had been when his son had left that morning, sleeping half on some ratty couch scavenged from the side of the highway, half on the splintered wood floor bare but for the scattered glass bottles that littered it from the living room to the kitchen, broken by spells of gruff, bright-eyed energy that grew shorter and rarer as the years passed - they suffocated him, as surely as thistle in a rose garden. He didn't understand until he left home that this wasn't normal, that it wasn't normal to share so much of another's pain, didn't understand how much of who he was was the soul of the man who raised him as he drowned where he stood. He regretted so much, now, for all that he knew that there was nothing he could have done, that no conceivable world existed where the elder Graham would have accepted the kind of help that he needed, never mind one where he could have afforded it. He knew in all rationality that a skinny kid with a mind made of nightmares stitched together with screams couldn't hope to bear the weight of the faltering sanity of the only parent he had ever known, not when it was all he could do to keep his own head above the water, but there was no telling that to his heart.

He was alone after that, for the most part, had never been much good at making friends, had no extended family that he'd ever heard, and if his mother was alive or dead, well, either way she had no need for some dumb kid. She'd made that very clear.

So family had been distant and friendship sporadic, his closest friend as a child, albeit in the limbo between child and adult that is adolescence, being a girl in ripped leggings and raccoon-eyeshadow who worked in the back of a dim-lit boutique near the docks he hung around evenings and weekends to pick up odd jobs and who smoked out back behind the gym at the rundown high school where he took classes when he was fifteen. Her name was Emily but she called herself Raven. She can't have been unaware of his reputation as a weird loner, so he figured she found it more an attraction than a deterrent. They never talked much, but when he ate his lunch out in the schoolyard, she'd come lean against the big bay tree he sat by and smoke, least until her dad got a new job and moved the family back to New Hampshire.

His closest friend, or the closest thing to a friend, in his adult life was probably Harlow Stevens, a big friendly fellow with a face like night and a smile like the milky way, the only partner he had at New Orleans who lasted longer than a couple months, who kept a framed picture of his two girls on his desk. Cute kids, with big smiles like their daddy's and hair in braids tied in a rainbow of colourful ribbons. He used to put the photo face-down when he'd had a rough day and Stevens was out so he wouldn't see them, as if somehow he could keep the evil behind his eyes from touching them through something so small. Every Friday, Stevens would ask him to Sunday dinner with the family, and every Friday, Graham would politely decline.

It has been a long time since he has had any emotional intimacy beyond the preternatural knowing that came from exploring the crimes and the minds of the depraved. It's been so long since he's been close to someone, and since he's been understood in any way analogous to how he understands... Well, he's never had that.

His eyes scan the sports section without his brain taking any notice. A restless energy runs through his body, like he's grabbed a live wire, and his hands are shaking, feels like since the night before, feels like it'll never stop.

He glances over to Lecter, who grants him the illusion of being unobserved, drops his gaze to Lecter's arm, a hand's breadth away from his own - bare, the sleeve rolled to the elbow, and bruised, though the bruise neither as deep or as vibrant as the one that decorates the column of his own throat. Lecter's hand is squarish, but elegant, and the fingers softly drum an unknown rhythm against the arm of his chair. Graham knows it's wrong, knows rationally that the basest parts of his brain have merely confused proximity for community and a hiatus from violence with kindness, but for a far-too-long moment, he considers reaching out, seeking comfort.

He blinks, swallows against the warring emotions of yearning and disgust.

He considers, only for that one moment, taking Lecter's hand and pulling him closer. He thinks about it, for a weak, vulnerable moment.

Then he thinks better.

Chapter 36

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Despite what television would have the civilian populace believe, police work, and by extension, FBI work, is largely a matter of prolonged, relentless drudgery sporadically interrupted by bouts of desperate, sleep-deprived action, rarely resulting in any timely of satisfying conclusion and, often, resulting in no closure at all. Criminal investigations are predominantly perspiration with a hefty helping of absolute, stupid, incoherent luck - far more luck than Jack Crawford was anywhere within the zipcode of comfortable with.

The Shrike case is demoralizing in the way that all such cases are: public panic leading to official pressure, itself leading to a great deal of busywork but not a single viable lead, as the inevitable march of time means that every day that goes by necessarily brings the possibility of another disappearance, another death, another thread cut short. Thin hope came in the form of a sliver of metal found on the body of Elise Nichols, which gave investigators a list of suspects hundreds of names long, but no means of discerning between them, of separating the wheat from the chaff, the sick sonofabitch taking girls in the night from a multitude of near-identical men matching Bloom and Lecter's too-vague profile but for that well-hidden itch for violence, that unseen taste for blood.

The break in the case comes, far too late for three more missing girls, when the strange incident of a home invasion with no apparent motive was flagged on a hunch by a Rochester detective on loan to a small town precinct to oversee the investigation based on the profile of the one known victim - weight, height, age, hair and eyes, all a match for the victimology of the tackily-dubbed Minnesota Shrike. It was a long shot, a hail Mary pass, but for desperation and a lack of any other strong possibilities, whatever federal lab jockeys drew the short straw were sent down to process the crime scene - already hopelessly contaminated by first responders and inexperienced local cops - and found, almost by accident, a throw pillow stuffed with long, brown human hair.

The full force of the FBI task force descended on the Hobbs house, processing the scene for a third time as well as the missing Mr. Hobbs' hunting cabin, collecting samples of every conceivable item to test for human DNA and match against the previous victims, interviewing the neighbours and the distraught Mrs. Hobbs, who had been out to the store at the time of the attack, creating a timeline for Mr. Hobbs' whereabouts over the last year, and putting out a BOLO for Garret Jacob Hobbs - tall caucasian man, balding, presumably on foot, given that his car still sat in the drive.

Investigators were no longer looking at the Hobbs case as a home invasion. No, not anymore. The new narrative was simple: Hobbs was their killer, their Shrike, who had lost control with the stressor of his daughter preparing to leave home, had kidnapped the eleven victims, and used his hunting cabin for the privacy to deal with the bodies, until the stress of the closing noose of the investigation caused him to break, finally attacking his daughter and then becoming a fugitive. Simple. Neat. There's evidence enough to justify a call for a full state of

emergency and to bring the full force of federal, state, and local law enforcement to a hunt for Hobbs, and while the media attention will be brutal, his hand is forced by the fact that it will be all the uglier if he sits on this, but something about this just isn't right. They had been nowhere close to catching Hobbs, and Hobbs had no reason to think that they were - he was too organized for that, too cautious. It was self-flattery of the worst kind to believe that the power of the FBI had driven the man to desperation.

Jack Crawford stands beside the faded pool of blood that still stains the faded linoleum of the homey kitchen like a ghoul at a tea party. He pulls back one of the pale curtains dotted with stray specks of dried arterial spatter with a gloved hand and watches the leaves of the trees tremble in the early breeze through the pane of the window above the sink and sighs. Too simple. Too neat. There's more to this; he can smell it. What he can see, however, is a subtle irregularity in the immediate tree line directly across from this window: a big oak tree wide enough around for a grown man to hide behind if need be, far enough away to disguise a watcher from even a trained eye if the family within didn't expect to be watched.

Crawford ducks out of the kitchen, sidestepping a nervous tech, exits the house, and strides across a once-groomed lawns showing the first early signs of neglect. A few young agents take on additional burst of seriousness and activity as he passes. At the tree line, he glances back at the house and squints. He pulls his phone from his pocket as he steps behind the tree. On the truck on the tree facing away from the house, into the woods, a patch of bark the length and width of Crawford's palm has been peeled back and cut away, perhaps by a pocket knife, and the rough diagram of an anatomical heart carved into the white sapwood wood below. Recent. The undergrowth at the base of the tree is flat, bent, trampled, with thin lengths of deadfall snapped into pile of two to four inch sections nearby.

He puts the phone to his ear.

"Boss?"

"Keller, stand in front of the window."

"What?"

Crawford rolls his eyes. "Now, Keller."

He can't tell, at least immediately, when Keller steps before the window - his silhouette upon the drapes is faint, blurred, in the broad light of day, particularly at this distance. The call reporting the attack logged at 6:15 A.M.

The neighbours saw nothing. They couldn't, not through this tree-cover.

But someone did.

"Jack?"

"Did the locals hand over a copy of the emergency call or the paramedics' report?"

"Doesn't look like it."

“Find it. Get it. ASAP. And by ‘as soon as possible’, I mean ‘now’.”

“911, what is your emergency?”

The next twenty seconds are a rush of strange white noise and static.

“Hello? Is anyone there? Please state your emergency.”

A loud clatter comes. The low voice that responds on the recording borders on the unnaturally calm as it relays the address of the Hobbs’ home in a clinical monotone. *“One patient, female, laceration to the neck which appears to have nicked the left carotid. Pressure has been applied. Prepare the ambulance crew for possible hypovolemia.”*

“An ambulance is on it’s way. In the meantime, could I have you name please, miss? Miss?”

Silence. Static.

“Miss?”

Chapter End Notes

Bonjour mes amis! So, I've held off on bringing this up because I'm an awkward human being, but I've started posting some original fiction here: http://archiveofourown.org/works/4129449/chapters/9310128
You certainly don't have to, but it'd be cool if some of you might check it out and let me know what you think. I've also started a monthly comedy (?) podcast which is available at soundcloud.com/birdcalling and should be up on itunes in a couple hours. I'm a little embarassed, but I thought it came out well, and I am desperate for external reinforcement to confirm my value as a human being.

Chapter 37

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The emotion that Alana Bloom experiences when she hears of the break in the Shrike case and the escape of and consequent manhunt for the primary suspect on the morning news as she eats breakfast and looks over the notes for her first class of the day is devastating simple. It would be easier to say that she felt a mixture of grief and fear - for the dead and the yet living respectively - that she felt no more and no less than the righteous anger of the morally upstanding in the face of the monstrous cruelty of man. It would be easier, but the truth of her heart was an overwhelming wave of relief that her part in this mess was over and that she could stop looking at happy pictures of dead girls and move on to other, less emotionally charged projects.

She wonders, as the kettle comes to a boil, whether or not she should call Quantico and cancel her meeting with Jack Crawford, originally arranged to trawl once more over the useless psychological profile that had yet to lead them anywhere but in ever more desperate circles. She decides against it - at the very least, a debrief on the pertinent facts not yet released to the notoriously panicky and flighty public will lend some sense of closure.

That afternoon Beverly Katz pokes her head out of the forensics lab into the hall as Bloom passes and waves her over. “Hey Dr. Bloom, if Jack doesn’t need you right away, mind lending us your brain for a minute?”

Bloom acquiesces, albeit with hesitance, and steps into the lab, where the astringent scent of indefinable chemicals wallops her right in the nose. “Certainly, I could, though, if this is about our profile, then there really isn’t any more I can provide until Garret Jacob Hobbs is in custody.” She adds wryly, “And only then if he somehow survives the enthusiasm of law enforcement for his capture.”

Katz gives an equally sardonic shake of the head. “Boys will be boys seems a bit tacky, but I don’t know what else to say. If he hadn’t killed twelve teenagers - why, I’d almost feel sorry for the bastard. But no, no serial killers.”

Price, at the back of the forensics lab with Zeller, titters. “Well, some serial killer, but only tangential serial killer. We were thinking you might help us find our mystery witness.”

Bloom enters the room with a mental shrug. “I’m given to understand Dr. Lecter will arriving shortly. Are you sure you wouldn’t like to wait for his input?”

Zeller snorts. “Like, no offense Dr. Bloom? I know you and Jack love Lecter, but he gives the rest of us the heebie jeebies. We’ll cross that bridge when we get to it, not a moment before, and then only if we have to.”

Bloom’s eyebrows migrate farther up her forehead the longer Zeller talks, but Price clears his throat primly and it’s back to business.

Bloom begins. “You have a witness.”

“Two witnesses.” Keller smirks, “Unfortunately, they are both 100% grade-A useless.” Price continues. “Witness number one or, if you prefer, very nearly victim number thirteen : Abigail Hobbs, Garret Jacob Hobbs’ own daughter. Brown hair, blue eyes, high school senior, just like you and Lecter predicted. Daddy tried to cut her throat four days ago, found his prints all over the knife, clear as day, beautiful stuff, but she survived somehow. Always the bridesmaid, never the bride I suppose.”

Katz butts in. “Unfortunately, she’s been in a coma ever since. We couldn’t even figure out how she kept enough blood on the right side of her skin long enough for the paramedics to arrive until we requested the tape of the emergency call and interviewed the paramedics, which leads us to witness number two.”

On cue, Keller takes over once more. “We figure witness number two was watching the family for at least several days. Monitoring them. The day daddy-dearest flips his lid, that’s who intervenes, that’s how we get the call to emerg, that’s who keeps baby-bird from bleeding out on the linoleum. So two facts up front: one, witness numero dos was suspicious of the Hobbs family for whatever reason or is just a massive creep with a hero complex, and two, whoever they are they have way more than a rudimentary understanding of first-aid - which limits us to the tens of thousands of nurses, doctors, paramedics, EMTs, and medical students that could have been in the area - but that’s not even the best part-”

“The best part,” Price blurts, “is the paramedics description of her from when she rode along in the ambulance - female, brown hair, blue eyes, same height, same weight as all the others. They thought she was Abigail Hobbs’ sister, but she goes missing the moment they get to the hospital, just walks out without leaving any name, any contact information, nothing.”

“Um, I wanted to say that.”

Price sniffs. “If you want to say the good stuff then get to the good stuff. Some of us have an entire three story house plus cabin of prints to catalogue and don’t have all day.”

“I was just about to say it, if you had only given me another-”

Katz sighs. “Boys, boys, it doesn’t matter who gets to say it. May I remind you that we have company?”

Keller grumbles but subsides, and Bloom seizes her chance to interject: “So witness number two matches the victim profile for the Hobbs case?”

“Right on the money,” Katz passes her a blurry photograph of a young woman whose hands are clean to the wrists but whose arms are coated with what looks to be blood and gore well past the elbows. “We get a few frames of what we think is her from a camera in the ambulance bay, but it’s not much.”

“Is it possible she’s what set Hobbs off? The trigger event?”

They fall silent, glancing at one another. Price is the one who answers. “We considered that, certainly, but we haven’t been able to construct a timeline, so we can’t know whether she was in the house before Garret Jacob Hobbs decides to make a long-pork sandwich or whether she entered in response to the commotion in the kitchen. All we know is all the blood in the kitchen appears to originate with the laceration to Miss Hobbs’ neck. As far as we can tell, there’s no other blood source - so... what? A hundred-twenty-so pound woman breaks into the Hobbs home, and Hobbs response is to attack his own daughter? Is that it?”

Katz shakes her head. “There’s something missing. There has to be.”

Bloom hums and nods. “So, what do you need me for?”

Keller hems and haws. “Oh, well… you know-”

Price interrupts. “You could tell us what to get back to work maybe? Shout at us for a little while?

“...What?”

“Just try it out, give it a go!”

Bloom raises an eyebrow. “...I’m not Jack.”

“We’d noticed-”

“It’s just that Jack has been on the ropes for the last forty-eight hours - I don’t think he’s slept more than two hours straight since Thursday-”

“But it just isn’t the same without him.”

Bloom smiles despite herself. “Well, then good job, and get the hell back to work.”

Chapter End Notes

...I hereby dub this chapter "Passing the Bechdel test."

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